

Herman hardly let our newfound wealth rest in his hand before buying bus tickets out of the natural wonderland of Yellowstone, but then tucked away the rest of the money, this time in a shirt pocket that buttoned tightly, with the firm pronouncement, "Belly timber must wait, up the road. No candy bars even, until we git where we go."

That was reasoning I could not really argue with, although if it had been up to me, I would have been sorely tempted to risk the rainbow trout special for something to sit on top of that broon breakfast, as he called it, of decrepit bread and mushy pickles.

So it was that we arrived worse for wear inside as well as out, several hours and a long stretch of highway later, at the Greyhound terminal in Butte, of all places, Herman unshaven for a couple of days and badly looking it and me in a wrinkled rodeo shirt showing every sign that I had been living in it day and night. Grooming was not foremost on our minds, however. Hunger was making me so cranky Herman had to relent on the candy bars, and he wolfed into the first of his as readily as I did mine while we hustled from the newsstand on into the waiting

remainder

“See, it’s a town called that,” my finger had to come into it now to show him a dot on the map so small it was hard to tell from a flyspeck. “Wisdom is way down there in the Big Hole.”

Leaning in and adjusting his glasses, Herman tried to fathom what we were looking at. “Something been digged deep, and the town fell in?”

“Huh-uh, the Big Hole is a sort of a, oh, what do they call it, a real round valley with everything like this.” I cupped my hands as if carrying water, Herman squinting his good eye as he followed the description. Giving a little think, he soon had the word.

“Basin?”

“That’s it! The Big Hole Basin. It’s famous in Montana, honest.”

“Famous, what for?”

“Hay.”

“Cow food? Donny, are you lost in your mind? What good is hay to us? We cannot be cow farmers.” He balked like that until I managed to spell out to him jobs on some ranch in the best hay country under the sun. “That’s the really great thing about the Big Hole,” I pressed my argument as I saw him waver in the face of facts such as actual wages to be made in a hideyhole off in a corner of gee-oh-raphy from anywhere. “There’s hay up the yanger there, they’ll be putting it up the whole rest of the summer. Time enough for--”

“--Killer Boy Dillinger to go away from public eyes,” he thought out the rest for himself, nodding his head sanely instead of shaking it like a rattle. “I take back that you left your mind, Donny. Let’s go to Wisdom place. Maybe some rub off, hah?” he laughed dry as dust.

Now here we were, only a pair of dog bus tickets short of the half-hidden town that was the gateway to hay heaven. I couldn’t wait to get there, brimming as

91 He continued to talk

room. For once, we did not have to run eyes and fingers over the almighty map lettered COAST TO COAST THE FLEET WAY. Up on the Departures board along with bus times to Denver and Seattle and Portland and Spokane and other metropolises of the West was all we needed to know.

3:10 TO WISDOM.

“Donny, no time to smart ourselves up like Einsteins,” Herman had scolded me back there outside the Old Faithful Inn when we were stuck in despair before that all-weather map of bus routes, futilely trying to will ourselves beyond being broke and stranded, and for that matter WANTED, in Yellowstone, which is when I’d blurted that what we needed was Wisdom. “They throw me in the stony lonesome, like you say,” he grumbled with another look over his shoulder, “I’ll have plenty time to git wise.”

“No, no, not that kind,” I held rock-solid to my inspiration, surer than sure. “Wisdom is a real place we can go to, honest!”

Out of all the map dots of the West I had spotted it, as I kept stroking the arrowhead in its pouch under my shirt, commanding it to show it was big medicine, damn it, make some luck for a change. We needed a lucky break in some direction, north, south, east, west, it didn’t matter. Somewhere to hole up, until people’s memories of a horse-faced man with a German accent faded with the passage of time. But where? Make a run for the coast, to Portland or Seattle or Frisco? Hide out in some Palookaville? Hightail to Canada, on the chance they wouldn’t know an enemy alien when they saw one up there? Then it came to me, in something like fingerspitzengefühl style but ^{with} just the right glance alighting on the perfect place. All I had to do was convince Herman.

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I was with visions of driving the stacker team on some well-run ranch with no Wendell Williamson to say Nuhuh, horsepower over horses, the birdbrain, while Herman was hired on as--well, that would have to be determined. First, the ride of what appeared from the route map to be only a couple of hours at most, a snap of the fingers for seasoned travelers like us.

On the other hand, the distance from the map to the ticket office on the far side of the waiting room gave us both cause to pause. From the moment we stepped in through the ARRIVALS swinging doors, the Butte bus depot looked like a hangout for bums and other toughs. Throughout the waiting room, poorly dressed men with bent shoulders and faces with a lot of hard mileage on them, the best description was, were slouched on benches that would never be mistaken for church pews, and the baggy-eyed women perched next to them did not look much better. Even more unsettling to me were scruffy boys my age roving through the crowd, shrilly hawking newspapers at the top of their voices. Orphans, was my immediate thought, captives of that close relative of the poorfarm, the state orphanage right here in Butte. Around the corner, for all I knew. In more ways than one, if Herman was nabbed for being a MOST WANTED and I was dumped into that so-called home for outcast children. The Greyhound waiting room here in what precisely was meant in that jackrabbit telegraph message that could shock a schoolyard to silence, *So and so got sent to the other side of the mountains*, raised my short hairs, in other words.

Down through time, it did dawn on me that citizens of a famously tough copper company town with neighborhoods called Muckerville and Dublin Gulch and mines with names such as Destroying Angel and Look Out were not likely to be physical wonders and fashion plates, nor were they all necessarily examples of what the orphanage did to people. Even had Herman and I been given that realization then, there was a prickly feel that we had better watch our step--that was

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did, more so, even. As much her eye-dea as mine, pretend we're married. Worth it to have a man around, she telled me, somebody she can boss like she is used to with Fritz. Joke at the time," he sighed, "but she meant it, you maybe noticed."

I was listening for all I was worth, but Aunt Kate's bossy tendency that had driven both of us batty shrank to nothing compared to picking up the phone and turning in her imitation husband to the FBI. That truth rattled through me--the clank of a jail door closing behind Herman--shaking me to the core. The hard knocks of history were not done with him yet. Or for that matter, with me.

The one thing clear was that the face of Herman the German, enemy alien, was plastered here, there, and maybe everywhere in town, as public as the sun, and Butte was full of sharpies who would trade him in to the lawmen in an instant if it was to their advantage. Such as Ducky Carnahan who still owed us twenty dollars.

"We need to get out of here," my voice broke, Herman chiming "Ja, ja, ja," as I scrambled to my suitcase and he to his duffel. That was as far ahead as either of us could think. That and the map at the Greyhound depot.

He pursed up at that, but did not wish to really argue the point. Taking off his glasses to clean them with his hanky, he blinked as if to clear his eyes too, especially the artificial one. Then, glasses back on, very deliberate, visibly thinking, he leaned so close to the map it looked as if he would touch it with his nose--how this fit with *fingerspitzengefuhl* eludes me--but he didn't, quite. Close study was necessary in more ways than one, because it went without saying that our world of the West had shrunk drastically, with the diminishment of our money and prospects. The land of the Apaches, say, was far, far out of reach until our fortune and fortunes improved. At the moment, looking nervously around at the park rangers starting to appear at various gathering spots around the geyser and hot pools, all the getaway I wanted was an escape from Yellowstone and Herman's lack of legal existence.

that a person can't quite get to again. Some amazing fact from a *National Geographic*, maybe? Something digested way too deep from a Condensed Book? I hoped it was not anything one of the canasta witches came up with, because I was trying to forget their yackety-yack. Whatever the elusive think was, to put it in Herman's terms, it was lost to the immediate matter of being the next thing to hoboos.

As if to rub it in, the tourist world was comfortably coming to life, people moseying out onto the deck from breakfast--breakfast!--to gawk at Old Faithful gushing away like a hundred fire hydrants, tour busses pulling up in front of the Inn and baggage wranglers piling suitcases into the luggage compartments. I watched the busses with a pang, longing for a Greyhound to take us somewhere, anywhere.

Herman read my mind. Trying to appear like travelers actually able to buy tickets, we hefted our luggage over to the loading area where in routes of red on a map sheeted over with weatherproof plastic, THE FLEET WAY once again was promised.

"Guess what, Donny," Herman began, waggling his fingers piano-player fashion to encourage mine, "time for you to--"

"Nothing doing." I tucked my hands in my armpits. "You choose. My finger-spitting got us into this."

"Huh-Huh-Herman," I gasped. "Look."

"What we must do. When geyser shoots." He stood in front of the bulletin board, and when he said, "Now!" I ripped the poster down and stuffed it inside my shirt.

Donny spots Wanted poster next to the post office--Sch catches his eye. It shows Herman as an enemy alien; Kate has turned him in. The photo is an old one, without glasses, when he was a Great Lakes seaman, but he could be recognized.

listing of offices in Butte post office on his way out--FBI one of them.

"Turned me in, she did," he said almost inaudibly.

It took me a moment to gather that in. "Aunt Kate? Aw, huh-uh, how could she?" Despite everything I had against the woman, the summer's accumulation of bossy behavior and selfish decisions and plain dumb misunderstandings that ended in her getting rid of me, tears or no tears, I categorically couldn't believe it of her.

"Isn't there a law or something? Holy smokes, Herman, she's your *wife*."

He stared at the WANTED poster in his big hands as if asking the same of it, then looked away from the photo of his younger self, from me, from anything except the real question that invaded the room, taking over his voice.

"Who said we are married?"

You could have knocked me over with a canary feather. Speechless at first, I tried to get my mind around the pair of them living under the same roof, sleeping in the same bed, fighting the same battle every breakfast, all these years without ever--as the saying was--visiting the preacher.

Thickly I managed to stammer, "But she's a Schmidt, like you. You've got to be married for that, don't you?"

He shook his head. "She took the name, is all. Easier that way. Keep people from thinking we are living"--he really gave his head a shake now, as if trying to clear it--"in sin, hah. More like, in duty. Soldiers, both of us, you could say. From time of Witch of November when--"

The story was, when Fritz was lost in the storm that sent the *Badger Voyager* to the bottom of Lake Michigan and Herman survived but with an eye

gone, the new widow Kate came to see him in hospital. “All broke up, crying like cloudburst. Tells me she knows what friends Fritz and I was, how hard it is for me, like her. And this”--he tapped alongside the substitute eye--“meant I was without job.” You can about hear her, he mused, declaring this was too much on both of them, it wouldn’t hurt them one time in their lives to do something out of the ordinary. “Said if I wanted place to stay,” he drew the tale to an end, “I could come to the house.” Gazing off, maybe looking back, he shrugged. “Never left.”

Bewildered anew, I blurted, “But all the time I was there, you fought like--”

“--dogs and kitties, ja. Not at first,” he tempered that, looking to me for understanding. “But you think about it, the Kate was used to Fritz away a lot, on boat. I was not away, ever, and it got on the nerves. Me on hers, her on mine, fair to say.” He spread his hands, as if balancing choices. “Sad to say, but both too stubborn to give in to situation. Until--”

He did not have to say the rest. Until I showed up, a stranger off the dog bus, bringing with me old baggage in more ways than one for Gram’s sister and a jolt of imagination for the man going through life not being Dutch, not being an actual husband, not really grounded in anything but dreams of adventure in the West. Feeling responsible, guilty, full of blame, all while trying strenuously to deny it to myself, I started to throw a fit. “Goddamn-it-all-to-hell-anyay, why didn’t you and her get married in the first place like you were supposed to and we wouldn’t any of us be in this fix and, and--”

My tantrum dwindled as the answer caught up with me. “The alien thinger?”

“Ja,” he acknowledged wearily. “Marriage license could not be got without naturalization paper. Not worth the risk to go and say, after all the years, here I am, how do I make myself American?” With a last blink at the WANTED poster, he creased it to put in his pocket, still speaking softly. “The Kate believed same as I

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Rolling her eyes, she put a hand to the peanut brickle plate. Finding it empty, she bit off instead: "Because it's a rule. How many times have I gone over those with you? Mmm? Can't you put your mind to the game at all?"

At that, our eyes locked, her blue-eyed stare and my ungiving one right back. It didn't help that the long suit of both of us was stubbornness. I more than matched her outburst with my own.

"There are too many rules! This canasta stuff goes through me like green shit through a goose!"

I know it is the mischief of memory that my outburst echoed on and on in the room. But it seemed to. At first Aunt Kate went perfectly still, except for blinking rapidly. Then her face turned stonier than any of those on Mount Rushmore. For some seconds, she looked like she couldn't find what to say. But when she did, it blew my hair back.

"You ungrateful snot! Is this the thanks I get? That sort of talk, in my own house when I've, I've taken you in practically off the street? I never heard such--" Words failed her, but not for long. "Did you learn that filth from him?" She flung an arm in the direction of the greenhouse and Herman.

"No!" I was as shrill as she was. "It's what they say in the bunkhouse when something doesn't make a lick of sense." I was really, really tempted to let her have it again, by saying I wouldn't futz with that kind of language if it bothered her so. But for once, I knew when to shut up.

"Look around you, mister fellow," she blazed away some more. "This is not some unciviized bunkhouse on some piddling ranch in the middle of nowhere. Dorie must be out of her mind, letting you hang around with a pack of dirty-mouthed bums. If she or somebody doesn't put a stop to that kind of behavior, you'll end up as nothing more than--"

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She didn't finish that, simply stared across the table at me, breathing so heavily her jowls jiggled.

"All right," she swallowed hard, then again, "all righty right. Let's settle down." If sitting there letting her tongue-lash the hide off me without so much as a whimper wasn't what might be called settled down, I didn't know what was. My tight lips must have told her so, because her tone of voice lessened from ranting to merely warning: "That is enough of those words out of you, understand?"

My face still as closed as a fist, I nodded about a quarter of an inch, a response she plainly did not like but took without tearing into me again. "That's that," she said through her teeth, and to my surprise, threw in her hand and began gathering in all the other cards on the table.

"I need to go and have my hair done, so we won't try any more cardsie-wardsie today." She fixed a look on me as I too readily tossed my hand in with the rest. "That gives us only tomorrow, because Saturday I have a million things to do around the house, and of course we can't play cards on Sunday." Heathen that she obviously thought I was, I didn't see why not, but I still kept my trap shut.

"Now then," she shoved the cards together until they built into the fat deck ready for my next day of reckoning, "while I'm out, find something to do that you don't have to swear a blue streak about."

Naturally I resorted to Herman. As soon as I called out "Knock, knock" and sidled into the greenhouse, he saw I was so down in the mouth I might trip over my lower lip. Squinting over his stogie, he asked as if he could guess the answer, "How is the canasta?"

"Not so hot." Leaving out the part about what went through the goose, I vented my frustration about endless crazy rules. "I try to savvy them, really I do, but the cards don't mean what they're supposed to in the dumb game. Aunt Kate is

He had me read out canasta rules from Hoyle while he dealt hands of fifteen cards each as if four of us were playing, the same as Aunt Kate had just tried, but that was the only similarity, the cards flying from his fingers almost faster than the eye could follow. I was heartened a little to hear him let out an exasperated "Puh" at the various rules that threw me. After scooping up his hand and studying it and then doing the same with the other two and mine, he instructed me to sort my cards into order from kings--in the girly deck, even those were naked frolickers around a throne or doing something pretty close to indecent with a crown--on down, left to right, with aces and wild cards and any jokers off the end together for easy keeping track, something Aunt Kate had never bothered to tip me off to. I will say, the bare parts of the French ladies peeking from behind the usual queens and jacks garbed to their eyebrows did cause me to pay a good deal more attention to the display of my cards.

This was the point at which I darted my free hand as unobtrusively as I could into my pants pocket and rubbed the arrowhead in its sheath. If it was going to be a lucky piece, there was no better time to start.

Book open beside him to do things according to Hoyle, Herman went right at it, with each of us drawing a card from the deck, melding any three of a kind we had, and making a discard. His eyeglasses glinting with divine calculation--or maybe it was a beam of light focused through a photographic pane of glass overhead--he instructed: "First thing after everybody melds, freeze the pile. Throw on a seven or a joker even? Get your bluff in, make it hard for the hens to build their hands."

It meant parting with the wild-card seven featuring a sly-looking blonde skinnydipping in a heart-shaped swimming pool, but I reluctantly figured it was worth it to place her crosswise on the discard pile to indicate it was frozen. If I couldn't pick up a desirable card when I wanted, why should anyone else?

wild
card
H/A
advice

half mad at me all the time for not doing better, but I don't know how." I ended up dumping everything into the open. "See, she's scared spitless her card party is gonna be a mess on account of me. So am I."

Herman listened closely, nursing the cigar with little puffs while he thought. "Cannot be terrible hard," he reasoned out canasta with a logic that had eluded me, "if the Kate and the hens can play it. Betcha we can fix." Telling me, cowboy style by way of Karl May, to pull up a stump while he searched for something, he dragged out the duffel bag from the corner of greenhouse.

Dutiful but still dubious, I sat on a fruit box as ordered and watched him dig around in the duffel until he came up with a deck of cards that had seen better days and a well-thumbed book of Hoyle. "We reconnoiter the rules, hah?" A phrase that surprised me, even though I pretty much knew what it meant. But we needed more than a rulebook, I told him with a shake of my head.

"We're still sunk. Aunt Kate and them play partners, so it takes two decks."

"Puh. Silly game." He swung back to the duffel bag, stopped short, turned and gave me a prolonged look as if making up his mind. Then thrust an arm in again. Scrounging through the bag up to his shoulder, he felt around until he grunted and produced another deck of cards even more hard-used than the first.

"The Kate is not to know," he warned as he handed me the deck and pulled out a fruit box to serve as a table. "Man to man, yah? Here, fill up your eyes good."

I was already bug-eyed. The first card, when I turned the deck over for a look, maybe was the queen of hearts all right, but like none I had ever seen--an oldtime sepia photograph of a woman grinning wolfishly in a bubble bath, her breasts out in plain sight atop the soapy cloud like the biggest bubbles of all.

With a gulp, I spread more of the cards face up on the box table, which meant breasts up, legs up, fannies up, pose after pose of naked women or rather as close to naked as possible without showing the whole thing. Who knew there were fifty-two ways of covering that part up? That didn't even count the joker, a leggy blonde wearing a jester's cap and coyly holding a tambourine over the strategic spot.

"French Bible," Herman defined the fleshy collection with a shrug, scooping the deck in with the tamer one and shuffling them together in a flash.

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About then, Herman noticed my hand visiting deep in my pants and tut-tutted with a frown. "Donny, sorry to say, but this is not time for pocket pool."

Turning red as that seven of hearts, I yanked my hand out at that accusation of playing with myself. "No, no, it's not that, honest. What it is, I carry, uh, a lucky charm and it's got to be rubbed for, you know, luck." He cocked his head in interest at my hasty explanation. I still was flighty about letting anyone see the arrowhead. But something moved me, maybe the spirit of Manitou, and I suppose somewhat ceremoniously I dug out the arrowhead and unwrapped it to show him.

"Hah! Bee-yoot-iful!" he gave something of a warwhoop upon seeing the arrowpoint, catching enough light through the glass panes to glisten like a black jewel. "Where did you get such a great thing?"

"I found it in the creek, right where some Indian dropped it, way back before Columbus," I gave what I considered the proper record of ownership, adding none too modestly, "It's rare."

"Goes with your moccasins, you are halfway to Indian," he puffed up my estimate of myself even further. His long face crinkled in a surprisingly wise smile. "Like I say, you are lucky boy. Now I know why."

He turned back to Hoyle. "So, we are solving the hen party. Let me give a little think," he switched to in almost the next breath, running his finger down the

Donna
throw
on
a wild
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canasta page black with rules. Silent for a minute, he then grinned a certain way, saying as if it was just our secret, "Hah, here is oppor-tun-ity. Hoyle don't say you got to put meld down any time quick." Reaching over, he grabbed up the cards I had melded and tucked them back in my hand. "Bullwhack the hens. Hide what you will do, yah?"

It took me a few blinks to rid myself of the mental picture of laying into Aunt Kate and Herta and Gerda with a bullwhip--"Take that, you canasta fiends!"--and figure out he meant bushwhack. Then to grasp his idea of an ambush, by holding back meld cards so Gerda and Herta wouldn't have any clue to what was in my hand, until the twin cardplaying demons blindly discarded something I had a bunch of and could snatch up the pile and put together melds like crazy. "'Eye-dea is, surprise their pants off," he formulated, already tracing through the dense print for further stunts I could pull. I giggled. That would put them in the same league as the undressed womanhood peeking various parts of themselves out at me from card to card. Canasta Herman style was proving to be worth ever so much more close attention than that of Aunt Kate.

In our session next day, she praised my new powers of concentration and confidence and what she unknowingly termed a better feel for canasta, amazed at the progress I had made. "That's more like it," she declared, celebrating with a chunk of peanut brickle. "Honeybun, I knew you could do it. All it takes is patience, mmm?"

That and whatever could be squeezed out of a lucky arrowhead and a French Bible.

Saturday came, the soap opera characters taking the day off to recuperate from their harrowing week--I could sympathize with them--and I was leery that

hold back
etc.

Crunching a bite of the brittle stuff, she thickly lectured through her chewing. "Learning the cards only takes concentration. It's no worse than putting your mind to what your schoolteacher shows you on the blackboard, is it."

I gave her a look meant to wither that comparison. Then when was recess? School was a breeze compared with this slow torture. I brooded as I tried to make sense out of a card game where threes of a certain color counted for more than aces, kings, or queens.

Paying no attention to my snit, she clasped her cards to her mound of chest and leaned across the table. Back to being bossy, she ordered, "Let me see your hand so I can show you what to keep and what are discards. Pay attention, mmm?"

It was all I could do to hold fifteen cards--canasta was played with a double deck, fat as a brick--and I slopped a few onto the card table tipping them toward her. Where was prestidigitation when I needed it? Without saying anything, she tucked those back into my hand, drew a mighty breath and went into a long recital of which cards I should try to build on by drawing from the deck or taking from the discard pile, and which ones were natural throwaways, as she called them.

As much as I tried to follow her baffling instructions that deuces counted twice as much as tenspots and so on, I couldn't shake the feeling of being caught up in something like a measles epidemic, only the spots were on the cards. In today's era of more home entertainment than we know what to do with, canasta seems as out of date as a Civil War songbook singalong around the upright piano. But let me tell you, in any day and age the latest thing can get to be a craze, and the freshly conceived card game with the Spanish name meaning "basket" swept into the living rooms of mid-century America like a fever. This I knew only in the vague way a kid picks up on the odd doings of grownups, but it left the definite impression that canasta was something played to the fullest by dried-up old ladies

another
word
thing
about
canasta

about a hundred pounds of difference behind the gaze, but it was all in Aunt Kate's favor.

Knowing when I was licked, I mumbled, "I guess I can try."

That began a spell of time when the high point of my days was the sugar on my cereal.

Talk about falling into a rut. Far from being the adventure I had been so excited about when I was met at the bus station by the living image of Kate Smith, my Wisconsin summer bogged down into the same old things day after day. Afternoons were canasta, canasta, canasta, and mornings veered from boredom when, after getting up hours earlier anyone else and doctoring some puffed rice with enough spoonfuls of the white stuff, all I could find to do was to hole up in the living room reading an old *National Geographic* brought down from the attic, until the time came to tread carefully around the first of the battles of the Schmidt household. Every day, Aunt Kate and Herman had a fight to go with breakfast. Generally it was her to start things off with a bang. "Can't you quit that?" Her first salvo would make me jump, even though it was not aimed at me. "It's childish and a nasty habit, how many times do I have to tell you?"

"Is not," he would pop right back. "Toast is made for such things."

"That is absolutely ridiculous. Why can't you just *eat*?"

"Hah. It goes in my mouth, same as you push it in yours."

"It is not the same! Oh, you're impossible."

The one constant in the repeated quarrels was Aunt Kate holding her ground in the kitchen, while Herman retreated elsewhere waiting to scarp over toast scraps another breakfast time. Eventually, when it sounded safe, I would abandon the green leather couch and *National Geographic* --even the attractions of people pretty close to naked in "Bali and Points East" can hold a person only so long--and creep

with nothing else to do. Aunt Kate was the opposite of dried-up, for sure, but from her warnings that “the girls” would beat the pants off us if we didn’t play our cards right, I pictured an ominous pair of prune-faced sharp-eyed whizzes who ate, slept, and dreamt canasta. Even their names sounded mean: Gerda and Herta.

“Now then,” Aunt Kate finished a spate of instructions that had gone right over my head. Canasta had a basketful of rules, for sure. “Anything you don’t understand, before we play out a hand?”

“Yeah, there is something,” I mustered myself, knowing it was now or never. Feeling vaguely traitorous but instinctively trying to save my own skin, I asked, “Why can’t Herman? Play cards with you instead of me, I mean.”

“Him?” The one word did that idea in, but she added for good measure, “The old silly, he calls our little canasta parties something rude having to do with chickens.” She snapped off a piece of brickle and held it as if she would like to throw it in the direction of him and his greenhouse hideout. “You can see he’d be impossible.”

What I could see was that I was being drafted to fill in at something where impossibility was in the air. Gulping, I tried another way to wiggle out of the canasta trap. “Gee, Aunt Kate, it’s awful nice of you to try to teach me like this, really it is, but I just don’t think I’m slick enough at cards to--”

“Don-ny.”

It’s always bad when an adult when an adult breaks your name in two. The doll-like eyes were fixed on me a certain way as she leaned across the table and enunciated further, “It won’t hurt you to do it one time in your life.”

I knew that look from her. Gram had one just like it whenever she prodded me into some task I didn’t want to be within a mile of. True, there was

across the living room to peek into the kitchen. The remains of the daily toast war which might still be sitting there at lunch or beyond, I could not figure out. Sometimes on what had to be Herman's plate would be nothing but crusts, other times a pale blob of toast from the middle of a slice that looked like something I almost but not quite recognized was the only morsel left over. In any case, I would face the inevitable and call out "Good morning" and she'd look around at me as if I'd sprung up out of the floor and ask "Sleep well, honeykins?" and I'd lie and reply "Like a charm" and that was pretty much the level of conversation between us.

I have to hand it to Aunt Kate, she was a marvel in her own way. To say she was set in her habits only scratches the surface. Regular as the ticks and tocks of the kitchen clock, she maintained her late start on the day, parked at the breakfast table in her robe striped like the world's biggest peppermint stick as she dawdled over the Manitowoc *Herald-Times* and coffee refills, yawning and and humming stray snatches of tunes, until at nine sharp she arose and clicked the radio on and one soap opera after another poured out, the perils of Ma Perkins and Stella Dallas and the others whom she worried along with at every devious plot turn afflicting them. The sudsy weepers filled the air until noon, always leaving the characters hanging in iffy circumstances at the end of the half hour. Myself, I thought the radio people ought to take a trip on a dog bus if they wanted some real situations, but Aunt Kate listened with both ears as she puttered away the rest of the morning, much of it spent in the sewing room with the Singer zizzing softly under the radio voices.

Needless to say, monotony was not my best mode. Herman's either, fortunately. During the soap opera marathon, he hid out in the greenhouse, where I sooner or later would join him so as not have radio performers' woes piled atop my own.

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“What do you know for sure, podner?” he would greet me, as no doubt one cowboy in a Karl May western would drawl to another.

Actually not a bad question, because the one thing I was sure of was what a mystifying place Manitowoc was, from toast fights to smoky portrait sitters inhabiting greenhouse windows to Manitou walking around dead to the strange nature of the neighborhood. I mean, I seemed to be the only kid for miles. As used as I was to being in grownup company at the Double W, now I apparently was sentenced to it like solitary confinement, with the street deadly quiet, no cries of Annie-I-over or hide-and-seek or boys playing catch or girls jumping rope, nobody much making an appearance except a grayhaired man or woman here and there shuffling out to pick up the morning paper or position a lawn sprinkler. It made a person wonder, did every youngster in Wisconsin get shipped off to some dumb camp?

In any case, the sleepy neighborhood was getting to me, so I finally had to put the question to Herman as he fiddled with a cabbage plant. “Aren’t there any other kids around here at all?”

“Like you?” I was pretty sure I heard a note of amusement in that, but he soon enough answered me seriously. “Hah uh, kids there are not. The Schermerhorns on the corner got boys, but they’re older than you and don’t do nothing but chase girls.” Taking the stogie out of his mouth, so as not to spew ashes on the cabbage leaves, he shook his head. “Except them, this is all old folks.”

I still had a hard time believing it. “In this whole part of town? How come?”

“Shipyard housing, all this. From when Manitowoc builds submarines in the war. The last one,” he said drily, I supposed to mark it off from the one going on in Korea. “People didn’t go away, after. Now we are long in the tooth,” he mused. He gave me a wink with his artificial eye. “Or ghosts.”

That was that, one more time. I pulled out a fruit box and settled in while he went on currying the cabbages.

Under the circumstances, with no other choice except Aunt Kate, hanging around with Herman in the greenhouse suited me well enough. Whenever he wasn't pumping me about ranch life or telling me some tale out of Karl May's squarehead version of the West, I was free to sit back and single out some family or man and woman in the photographic plates overhead, catching them on the back of my hand thanks to a sunbeam, and daydream about who they might have been, what their story was, the digest version of their lives. It made the time pass until lunch, when I'd snap out of my trance at Herman's announcement, "The Kate will eat it all if we don't get ourselves in there."

After lunch, though, inevitably, the nerve-racking sound in the living room changed from soap opera traumas to the slipslap of the canasta deck being shuffled and the ever so musical trill, "Yoo hoo, bashful," and all afternoon I'd again be a prisoner of a card game with more rules than a stack of Bibles.

"No, no, *no!*" She put a hand to her brow as if her mind needed support, a familiar gesture by this third or fourth day--I was losing track--of card game torture. "What did I tell you about needing to meld a full canasta before you can go out?"

"Oh. I must not have heard right. Better wash my ears out, I guess."

Her pained expression did not change. With regret I picked up the five foursspots I had triumphantly spread down on the card table. Going out, which was to say ending a hand of the dumb game and giving me an excuse to go to the bathroom and kill as much time I could in there, was a much desired play if I could make it. "I was thinking about something else, excuse me all to pieces. What do I do now?"

story

fingers at me and said, "Shoo now. We'll figure out what to do about that later." But when?

By every sign, not while I was stuck with a mittful of canasta cards. Back to brooding, I sucked on my chipped tooth as draw-and-discard drearily continued.

A little of that and Aunt Kate was grimacing in annoyance. "Don't they have dentists in Montana? What happened to that tooth, anyway?"

"Nothing much," I sat up straight as a charge went through me, my imagination taking off in the opposite direction from those modest words. "I got bucked off in the roundup, is all."

"From a *horse*?" She made it sound like she had never heard of such a thing.

"You betcha," I echoed Herman, pouring it on more than I had to, but a person gets carried away. "See, everybody's on horseback for the roundup, even Sparrowhead," I stretched the matter further. "I was riding drag, that's at the rear end of the herd, where what you do is whoop the slowpoke cows and calves along to catch up with the others. Kind of like *HYAH HYAH HYAH*," I gave her a hollering sample that made her jerk back and spill a few cards.

"Things were going good until this one old mossie cow broke off from the bunch," the story was really rolling in me now, ever so much better than admitting to a run-in with campers who didn't have a brain in their bodies, "and away she went with her calf at her heels. I took out after them, spurring Snipper--he's a cutting horse, see--and we about got the herd quitters headed off when Snipper hit an alkali boghole and started bucking out of it so's not to sink up to his, uhm, tail. I'm usually a real good rider," modesty had to bow out of this part, "but I blew a stirrup and got thrown out of the saddle. I guess I hit the ground hard enough that

“For a start, pay attention, pretty please,” she flicked the next card off the deck and waved it under my nose until I took it. “You’re stuck in draw and discard until a four shows up on the pile,” she reeled off as if in a language I couldn’t quite follow, “and you can take it all and build to a canasta.” Eyeing me sharply, she prodded: “You grasp that much, don’t you, sweetpea?”

I gave something between a nod and a shrug.

“Now then, I’ll see whether Herta ”--she employed the names of the two missing players as if they were sitting there, ghostly, on either side of us--“is likely to discard one for you.” Expertly she swooped up the face-down hand of cards to the right of me. “Not yet,” she announced in a singsong way, and slapped a useless five onto the discard pile as if that would teach me a lesson.

I suppose it should have, but nothing was really penetrating me except the something else I kept thinking about. The money. The disastrous shirt-in-the-garbage episode that left me broke as a bum. No mad money meant no going to a show, no comic books, not even a Mounds bar the whole summer, for crying out loud. But that wasn’t nearly the worst. It bothered me no end that if I went back to Montana in the fall without the school clothes Gram had expressly told me to stock up on, I would have to go to class looking like something the cat dragged in. People noticed when a kid was too shabby, and it could lead to official snooping that brought on foster care--next thing to being sentenced to the orphanage--on grounds of neglect. Gram would never neglect me on purpose, but if she simply couldn’t work and draw wages after her operation, how was she supposed to keep me looking decent? With all that on my mind, here was a case where I could use some help from across the card table, and I didn’t mean canasta. The one time I had managed to broach the subject of school clothes and so on between her morning loafing at the breakfast table and soap opera time, Aunt Kate flapped her

tooth couldn't take it. I was fine otherwise, though." I couldn't resist grinning at her with the snag fully showing.

"Good grief," my listener finally found her voice. "That's uncivilized! Poor child, you might have been damaged any number of ways!"

"Aw, things like that happen on the ranch a lot."

That put the huff back into Aunt Kate in a hurry. "Whatever has gotten into Dorie?" she lamented, catching me off guard. "That sister of mine is raising you to be a wild cowboy, it sounds like. Tsk," that tail end of the remark the kind of sound that says way more than words.

"Oh, it's not that bad," I tried to backtrack. "Gram sees me with my nose in a book so much she says my freckles are liable to turn into inkspots."

"Does she." As if looking me over for that possibility, she scanned my earnest expression for a good long moment, with what might have been the slightest smile making at her jowls twitch.

"All right then, toothums. Let's see if that studious attitude can turn you into a canasta player." Laying her cards face down, she scooped up those of the phantom Herta, drew from the deck, hummed a note of discovery, then discarded with a flourish, saying "My, my, look at that."

A fourspot, what else. I perked up, ready to show her that I knew what was what in this damn game. With a flourish I melded four of the fours and some other combinations to get on the board, and then as she watched with that pinched expression for some reason deepening between her eyes, I flashed my leftover fourspot and a joker as the pair to scoop in the valuable discarded four and the pile when the voice across the table rose like a siren.

"No, no, no! Wake up, child. You can't take that without a natural pair."

"Huh? Why not?"

trim?

Finishing dealing with a flourish, Aunt Kate slapped the deck down squarely in the middle of the table and sang out, "Now then, honey bun, the first thing is, we're partners, mmm? So, you have to catch up a weensy bit by learning a few rules." And there the life-changing course of events began.

"No, no, child, you can't meld that card. Pick it back up, hurry scurry." Topping over me like Mount Rushmore hogging the jigsaw puzzle, she forced a smile, the kind with teeth gritted behind it.

The first hour or so of canasta lesson wasn't up yet, and while her mind may have been set firmly as stone, mine was simply whirling. "Mistakes are life's little ways of setting us straight, aren't they," she recited as if reading off a sampler on the wall.

"But how come it's a mistake?" I came awfully close to whining. "You told me when I get a three, I'm supposed to put it down like that."

"*Red* threes," her tone of voice wasn't the best either. "Black treys, you need three of a kind as usual to meld, but can only play them to go out on."

Black, red, who cared? Since when wasn't a three a three? My ruthless instructor paused as I sulkily picked up the threespot of spades off the table and stuck it any old where in my mess of cards.

"That rule is a teeny bit tricky," she granted, then imperturbably took it back in the next breath. Plainly not to be budged until I either showed progress at canasta or perished from trying, she sat across from me like one of those Chinese dowager queens shown in a history book, her precisely arranged cards held like a fan, helping herself to a plate of chunks of rock-hard brickle, a peanut-butter kind of candy that I thought in no way deserved the name, kept handy for "nibbles to keep us going."

Canasta, which sounded foreign and complicated and about as appealing as being jailed in the stony lonesome. Fuck and phooey again, and this time I wouldn't have cared if Gram heard me clearly and threw a cat fit. I mean, were endless sessions of being trapped in a dumb card game with three versions of Aunt Kate picking away at me going to be my summer? It awfully much looked like it. My head still spinning at being turned into Minnie Zettel for hen parties, I was held captive then and there as my unwanted canasta instructor got right down to business.

The puzzle pieces were barely settled in the box before Aunt Kate was pulling up across the table from me and had the cards flying as she dealt a stream to each of us and to the absent partners right and left, humming something unrecognizable as she did so. Helplessly watching her deliver the valentines, as the poker game regulars in the Double W bunkhouse termed it, I felt unsure of myself but all too certain that turning me into a sissybritches canasta player was going to test the limits of both of us. And this was before I even had any inkling that a contest of hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades could become such a dangerous game.

While she was rifling the cards out, Herman wandered by the living room, took a peek at what was happening, sending his eyebrows way up there and his step quickening until he was safely past and out the back door. No rescue from that direction, so I cussed silently and kept stuffing cards in my overloaded hand.

this time
on scene
cut?

Aunt Kate might have second thoughts and sit me down me for one last canasta drill all forenoon. Instead she let me know in no uncertain terms that she was going to do some housecleaning and I'd need to find some way to occupy myself. "You can do that if you put your mind to it a weensy bit, I'm sure," she told me without any snookums stuff, for once.

I was puzzled. "Can't I be in the greenhouse with Herman like always?"

"Hmpf," she went, pretty much her version of his *Puh*. "Him? Didn't the old poot tell you? He won't be here."

Just then Herman appeared from the direction of their bedroom, surprisingly dressed up, at least to the extent of wearing a blue-green tie with mermaids twined coyly in seaweed floating all over it. "She is right, can you imagine. Time to go take my medicine." Jiggling the car keys, he halted across the kitchen table from her. "Donny can go with, why not?"

Aunt Kate snorted and barely glanced up from the scandals of the *Manitowoc Herald-Times*. "Schmidt, he is only eleven years old, that's why not."

"Old enough. We both knowed what is what in life by then, yah?" Not waiting for whatever she had to say to that, probably plenty, he turned to me with a wink of his glass eye. "Up to Donny, it should be. What do you say, podner?"

A trip along to a doctor's office did not sound any too good, putting me in mind right away of Gram's awful medical situation. On the other hand, it might help the case of cabin fever I was coming down with from my shacky attic room and the allures of Bali and other boundless places shown in the *National Georgrhics*. "Sure, I guess so," I said as if I didn't care one way or the other, hoping that would keep me on the straight and level with Aunt Kate. According to the parting snort she gave as Herman and I headed out to the DeSoto, it didn't.

In no particular hurry, Herman drove in that sea captain fashion, his big knuckly hands wide apart on the steering wheel while he plied me with questions about Montana and the Double W ranch and as many other topics wild, woolly, and western as he and Karl May could come up with. I probably answered distractedly, trying to figure out Manitowoc if I was going to be stuck there for the whole long summer. It appeared to be an even more watery place than I'd thought, the river with the same name as the town taking its time winding here and there--Gitche Manitou really got around on his spirit walks--before finding Lake Michigan. When we reached downtown, street after street of stores occupied brick buildings grimy with age-if this was the pearl of Lake Michigan, it needed some polishing. An exception was the movie theater with a marquee full of colored lightbulbs brightly spelling out the current show, TOMAHAWK with Van Heflin and Yvonne DeCarlo, until I remembered I was broke.

As Herman pattered us through the downtown traffic a fraction as fast as the van driver tore through the Twin Cities, I passed the time noting more of those curiously named stores I'd spotted from the dog bus, as if anyone going into business had to line up way down the alphabet. Schliesleder Tailoring. Schloter Brothers Grocery. Schroeter Bakery. You can't help but be curious about the schushy sound that half the town seemed to speak in.

"Hey, Herman? What's schnitzel?"

He worked on that as we pressed on past the main street buildings toward the more grubby waterfront ones. "What are little cattles? Hevvers?"

"The girl ones, uh-huh, heifers. Calf meat, you mean? Veal, that's all it is?"

"Yah. Fixed fancy with stuff on, you got schnitzel. Old German recipe."

"What's schnapps, then?"

cut?

“Firewater, Red Chief. Old German drink.”

“Boy oh boy, those old Germans really went for some funny stuff, didn’t they.”

“Ha. Good one.”

That was not nearly as many definitions as I’d wanted, but another matter quickly had me wondering as the DeSoto potted across the drawbridge of the weedy river and on past the coal sheds and boiler works. This doctor’s office was in an odd part of town and I tried to think what kind of ailment Herman needed to be treated for in a rundown neighborhood. Firmly built right up to the gray summit of his head, he looked healthy enough to me. “Uhm, this medicine of yours, what exactly is it?”

“Neck oil.”

Now he had me. I didn’t see anything stiff about the way he swung his head to give me a big bucktoothed smile, not the usual attitude shown when going to see the doctor.

Revelation arrived when he turned the car onto the last waterfront street, a block with the lake actually lapping under buildings held up by pilings, and parked at a ramshackle establishment with a sign over its door in weathered letters, THE SCHOONER. This I did not need to ask about, the Schlitz sign glowing in the window telling me all I needed to know.

Herman escorted me in as if the porthole in the door and the sawdust on the floor were perfectly natural furnishings where you go to take medicine, ha ha. I had been in bars before, what Montana kid hadn’t? But this one looked like it had floated up from the bottom of the harbor. Sags of fishnets hung from the entire ceiling like greenish-gray cloudbanks. Above the doorway were wicked-looking crossed harpoons, and the wall opposite the gleaming coppertop bar was decorated with hanks of rope in every twist and turn of sailors’ knots imaginable. Into the

mix around the rest of the long barroom were walrus tusks carved into intricate scrimshaw, and longhanded grappling hooks that looked sharp as shark's teeth, and those bright yellow slicker coats called souwesters, as if the wearers had just stepped out to sniff the sea air. To me, the place was perfect from the first instant, and I could tell Herman felt at home simply entering its briny atmosphere.

Still setting up for the day, the man behind the bar was so round in his various parts that in the wraparound apron and white shirt he looked more like a snowman than a bartender, but plainly knew his business when he turned with towel and glass in hand to greet Herman. "Well, well, it's the Dutcher. Must be ten o'clock of a Saturday." Me, he eyed me less merrily. "Uh oh, Herm, who's your partner in crime?"

I waited for the guttural response I knew was going to turn my stomach, that I was his wife's sister's grandson, practically worse than no relative at all. Instead, I heard proudly announced, "Gus, please to meet my grandnephew Donny from a big cowboy ranch in Montana."

There. My full pedigree. Stuff that in your pink telephone, why don't you, Aunt Kate. I grew an inch or two and swaggered after Herman to a bar stool just like I belonged. As I scooted on, Gus met me with a belly laugh--he had the full makings for it--while saying he didn't get many cowboys in the Schooner and warning me not get drunk and tear up the place. Just then the building shook, and I started to bolt for dry land.

"Sit tight, happens all the time," Herman was chuckling now as he caught my arm before I could hit the floor running. Gus informed me it was only the ferry to Michigan going out and the joint had never floated away yet, although it kept swaying thrillingly as I gawked at the gray steel side of a ship sweeping by the porthole windows facing the harbor and lake. Oh man, I loved this, almost the sense of sailing on the Great Lakes as Herman had so heroically done. As the slosh

of the ferry's wake died down and the building quit quivering, Gus snapped his towel playfully in Herman's direction. "Ready to take your medicine? Gonna beat you this time."

"Always ready for that, and it will be first miracle ever if you beat me," Herman replied breezily. Laughing up a belly storm, the bartender moved off along the line of beer spigot handles extending half the length of the bar, running a hand along them the way you do a stick in a picket fence. The assortment made me blink, beer tap after beer tap of brands I had never heard of, and I would bet, even the most seasoned drinkers in Montana probably had not. Rheinlander. Carling Black Label. Piels. Bavarian Club. Stroh. Schlitz, naturally, but then Blatz, followed by Pabst, for some reason spelled that way instead of Pabzt. On and on, down to the far end, where Gus stopped at a handle with a towel draped over it so it couldn't be read. "No peeking, Dutcher," he sang out. "You either, Tex."

"No reason to peek," Herman replied with utter confidence and gazed off into the fishnets and such, the mermaids on his tie looking perfectly at home. I had no problem joining him in losing myself in the nautical trappings, knowing full well a ship did not have a bunkhouse, but this was the most comfortably close to such a thing since the Double W.

Shortly, Gus came back scooting a shotglass of beer along the bar between thumb and forefinger. "Here you go, just up to the church window like always." I saw he meant by that it was only up to the jigger line, not even a full shotglass. Huh. Herman must be a really careful drinker, I thought.

Sure enough, he took the little glass of beer in a long slow sip, almost like you do drinking creek water out of your hand. Swirled it in his mouth as if thinking it over, then swallowed with satisfaction. "Hah, easy--Olde Rhine Lager."

The bartender slapped the copper top of the bar with his towel in mock fury. "God damn it, Herm, how do you do it? I had that brought in all the way from Buffalo to fool you."

"Takes more than Buffalo," Herman said with the simple calm of a winner and still champion, and set the shotglass aside like a trophy while the bartender trooped back to the hitherto mystery tap and drew a genuine glass of the beer, which is to say a schooner. "What about Cowboy Joe here?" he asked as he presented Herman the free beer. "I might as well stand him one too while I'm giving away the joint."

"Name your poison, podner," Herman prompted me as if we were in a saloon with Old Shatterhand, and so I nursed a bottle of Orange Crush while the two men gabbed about old times of the Great Lakes ore fleet and its sailors, Herman soon buying a beer to even things up a bit in the tasting game and a second Orange Crush for me, adding to the general contentment. I was drifting along with the pair of them to the Strait of Mackinac and Duluth and Thunder Bay and other ports of call, when I heard Gus utter:

"So how's Tugboat Annie?"

I went so alert my ears probably stood straight out from my head. Somehow you just know a thing like that out of the blue, or in this case, the fishnets. Aunt Kate, he meant.

Herman took a long slug of beer before answering. "Same same. Thinks she is boss of whole everything."

Gus laughed, jowls shaking like jelly. "She was that way even when she was slinging hash down here on the dock, remember? Order scrambled eggs and they'd just as apt to come fried and she'd say, 'Eat 'em, they came from the same bird that cackles, didn't they?'" He let out a low whistle and propellored his towel somehow sympathetically. "You got yourself a handful in her, Herm."

“Armloads, sometimes,” said Herman, not joking at all

Wait a minute. I was trying to catch up. The Tugboat Annie part I got right away, that rough and tough hefty waterfront character in stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*. But Aunt Kate was ever a *waitress*? Snooty as she was now, with her Kate Smith style of dressing up and insistence on good manners and all? It almost was beyond my ability to imagine her, twice the size of shapely Letty and her name sewn in big sampler letters on the mound of her chest, behind a cafe counter bawling meal orders to someone like Gram in the kitchen. And strangely enough, in their breakfast battles over slices of toast, Herman never threw that chapter of the past in her face.

Eventually we departed The Schooner, Gus vowing he would stump Herman the next time and Herman telling him Hah, he could try until the breweries ran dry, with me still wowed by that beer tasting stunt. Before we reached the car, I asked, “How’d you learn to do that?”

Herman was maybe somewhat tanked up on Olde Rhine Lager, but his answer was as sober as it comes. “Job I had in old country. Story for another time, when you want your hairs raised. Get in, Donny. We must go home and face the Kate.”

The Schneiders glanced at each other as if their hearing had failed.

I repeated the tricky word, adding "It means, uh, 'Where ghosts live' in Indian," which didn't seem to help.

"Don't know it at all. You, Mae?"

"Not a bit. Where in heaven's sake is it, somewhere far? Back east?"

The other somewheres of my trip--Pleasantville, Decatur, Chicago--the map dots of my imagination, my protection against the unknown that awaited me in one last bus depot where I was to give myself over to strangers, glimmered for a wistful moment and passed into simple memory. These two honest old faces could not be fibbed to nor did I want to, hard truth the destination I had to face now.

"No, no, it's in Wisconsin, honest. See, I'll show you." Producing the autograph book from my jacket pocket, I took out the precious piece of paper with the Manitowoc address and so on, Mrs. Schneider peering at the writing through her bifocals very intently before passing it across to Mr. Schneider who studied it with a squint of concentration identical to hers before handing it back to me. And more than that, I told them the whole story, Gram's scary operation and my parents killed by the drunk driver and the summer ahead of me in the hands of relatives who might as well be ghosts for all I knew about them, and the dog bus proving out Gram's prediction that it gets all kinds, the huffy little sheriff who thought I was a runaway and the slick convict who had almost made off with my suitcase--it spilled out of me in a flood, although I did hold back being soundly kissed by a vagabond waitress with *Leticia* stitched on her breast.

"Whew," Mr. Schneider whistled when I finally ran down, "you're a trouper for not letting anything throw you," and Mrs. Schneider added a flurry of *tsks* but the good kind that marveled at all I had been through. They put their heads together and figured out where Manitowoc must be from my ticket that

stowed

the other place was like, everything about Minneapolis was more than sizable as I perched on the edge of my seat peering out at it all, the first metropolis--it puffed itself up to that by stealing half the word, didn't it--of my life.

Wide as my eyes were at the sights and scenes, it was hard to take it all in. Even the department store windows showing off the latest fashions seemed to dwarf those in, say, Great Falls. Likewise, the sidewalks were filled with throngs that would not have fit on the streets back in Montana. People, people everywhere, as traffic increasingly swarmed around us, the tops of cars turtling along below the bus windows barely faster than the walking multitudes.

As the Greyhound crept from stoplight to stoplight, I couldn't help gawking at so many passersby in suits and snappy hats and good dresses on an ordinary day, each face another world of mystery to me. Where were they going, what drew them out dressed to the gills like promenaders in an Easter parade? Where did they live, in the concrete buildings that seemed to go halfway to the sky or in pleasant homes hidden away somewhere? I wished this was Wisconsin so I could start to have answers to such things, all the while knowing I was many miles yet from any kind of enlightenment.

When we at last pulled in to the block-long driveway of the impressive terminal, with numerous busses parked neatly side by side as if the silver dogs were lined up to start a race, the driver called out the routine I knew by heart now, lunch stop, conveniences, and so on. Minneapolis, however, was his changeover spot, so he got off ahead of the rest of us, but the relief driver was not there yet, and when I reached the bottom of the steps the departing driver gave me a little salute and said with a serious smile, "Take care of yourself, son."

Son. My chest was out, I'm sure, as I charged through the double doors of the bus station. I knew the driver had only said it because we were inadvertant

buddies after dealing with the larcenous man in the suit, but no one had called me that for the past two years.

In high spirits, I gazed around the teeming depot to scout out the conveniences and so forth. The slick-looking blue building, when we'd pulled up to it, took up most of the block, with a rounded entrance on the corner where three fleet greyhounds the same as on the bus seemed to be in an everlasting chase after one another around the top of the building. But impressive as the entranceway was, that was not the most outstanding thing to me. Inside, an actual restaurant, just like you'd find on a street, was tucked to one side of the majestic space, with a full menu posted. It hooked me at first sight; all due apology to Gram and her decree of sandwich for lunch, my stomach was only interested in a real meal. Hadn't I been through a lot since Bemidji, coping with the danger of being robbed blind? That kind of narrow escape was bound to cause an appetite, right? Besides, I still was carrying loose change wanting to be spent.

Anyway, feeling highly swayve and debonure out on my own in grownup territory, I found a table where I could see the big clock over the ticket counter-- most of an hour yet until the bus was to leave, but I wasn't taking any chances-- and was served chicken-fried steak by a pleasant waitress, although I didn't know what she was called because it wasn't written on her breast. To me in my grand mood, only one name in pink stitching deserved such prominence anyway.

Leticia. What a reward it was, when I was done with that summer of living out of a wicker suitcase and Gram met me at the Greyhound station in Great Falls, healed up and feisty as ever, to hear her say guess what, she had her old job back as fry cook at the truck stop in Browning. And guess what again, Letty was back too, waitress on the same shift. Havre didn't work out, I was not surprised to hear. And sure enough, there she was from then on,

red-lipsticked and sassy as she dealt out the meals Gram made appear in the kitchen's ready window, sneaking a cigarette whenever the counter wasn't busy, and boldly taking up where she left off with Harv the trucker. With his jailbreaking past behind him and happy--who wouldn't be, linked up with the world's best kisser--he was my great companion. On weekend trips to places like Great Falls and Helena sometimes he would take me with him in the bus-wide cab of his truck, and always pull over at a side road on the long hill at the Two Medicine River, so we could get out and put flowers at the two white crosses. Both couples of us lived in apartments above the famous Browning Mercantile, so everything a person could possibly want--school clothes, Reader's Digest Condensed Books--was right downstairs. I went to school with Blackfoot kids who all wore moccasins but none as good as my fancy-dance pair. To top off this fantastically lucky turn of life, I took my meals at the truck stop, with Gram dishing up chicken-fried steak whenever I wished and Letty giving me a wink and asking, "Getting enough to eat, sonny boy?"

"I said, are you getting enough to eat, sonny boy?"

I came to with a start, the Minneapolis waitress puncturing that vision as she started to clear away my empty plate. "Fine, yeah, I'm full as can be," I mumbled my manners as real life set in again, the public address system announcing departures and arrivals the same as ever.

Rousing myself with still plenty of time until I needed to be back at the bus, I left a dime tip as I had seen the person at the next table do, and roamed out into the busy waiting area, where I was naturally drawn to the news and candy stand.

The stand was piled on all sides with newspapers and magazines, and after buying a Mounds that I justified as dessert--it took the last of my pocket change,

add

but by supertime I would be sitting up to the table with Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch, the dog bus willing, so no big deal--I circled around looking at the magazines to see who was famous just then. On cover after cover was someone smiling big. Biggest of all, in every way, was the well-known face of the impressively hefty singer Kate Smith on the large cover of LIFE, which identified her as AMERICA'S FAVORITE SONGSTRESS--BLESSED WITH TALENT. If talent meant singing "God Bless America" over and over until her familiar voice stuck in the head of everyone in the country, she sure had that, all right. Giving her the admiring look of someone who, as Gram would have said, couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, I moved on to other publications, careful not to get anything on the glossy covers as I munched my candy bar. Movie stars populated a whole section of the newsstand, Elizabeth Taylor again, and Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck and Robert Taylor and a good many I had never heard of, but they were clearly famous. How I envied every gleaming one of them.

Perhaps it goes without saying that my fame fever was a product of imagination, but there was greatly more to it than that. Call me a dreamer red in the head, back then, but becoming famous and well off--well thought of wouldn't hurt, either--looked to me like a way out of a life haunted by county poorfarm and orphanage the other side of the mountains. A change of luck sort of like winning a real jackpot, in other words. Wouldn't we all take some of that, at eleven going on twelve or any other age? The missing detail that I had no fixed notion of what I might best be famous at--the talent matter--other than a world-record autograph collection, maybe even constituted an advantage, giving me more chances as I saw it.

Dreamily I drifted past to a selection of photography magazines, something new to me. There was one I picked up, *Photoplay*, with pictures of women in poses that interested me increasingly since that kissing experience with Leticia. The newsstand clerk glanced at me a couple of times, but apparently

change
 best
 Gary
 Cooper
 was
 thought
 of

“It’s too far. See, I’m going to visit my rich aunt and uncle. They live back east. In Decatur, Illinois.”

“Never heard of the place. What’s there?”

“The Cat plant.” That drew three blank looks. “Where they make bulldozers and graders and stuff like that.” I was developing a feel for the perimeter of story that could be got away with. A detail or two expanded the bounds to a surprising extent, it seemed like.

So, there it went, again. Out of my mouth something unexpected, not strictly true but harmlessly made up. An experimental fib, maybe it could be called. For I still say it was not so much that I was turning into an inveterate liar around strangers, I simply was overflowing with imagination. The best way I can explain it is that I was turned loose from myself. Turned loose, not by choice, from the expected behavior of being “a good kid,” which I was always a little restless about anyway. “Don’t get rambunctious,” Gram would warn whenever I got carried away about one thing or another. Now, with no check on my enthusiasm when it started playing tricks upstairs in me--the long bus trip seemed to invite daydreaming, mine merely done out loud--I was surprising myself with the creations I could come up with, rambunctious or not. I mean, what is imagination but mental mischief of a kind, and why can’t a youngster, particularly one out on his own, protectively occupy himself with invention of that sort before maturity works him over? One thing sure, the soldiers on their way to their own mindstretchng version of life ahead did not doubt my manufactured one in the least.

Shoulders shaking with laughter, Mickey forcefully nudged Gordon. “If it was the cat house, you’d know all about it, huh, Gordo?”

A story,
invention

you're
being a
stupid
again

cut
rambunctious

red-lipsticked and sassy as she dealt out the meals Gram made appear in the kitchen's ready window, sneaking a cigarette whenever the counter wasn't busy, and boldly taking up where she left off with Rudy the trucker. A happy-go-lucky guy--who wouldn't be, linked up with the world's best kisser--he resembled the bus driver who had saved me from the ex-convict. On weekend trips to places like Great Falls and Helena sometimes he would take me with him in the bus-wide cab of his truck, and always pull over at a side road on the long hill at the Two Medicine River, so we could get out and put flowers at the two white crosses. We all lived in apartments above the famous Browning Mercantile, so everything a person could possibly want--school clothes, Reader's Digest Condensed Books--was right downstairs. I went to school with Blackfoot kids who all wore moccasins but none as good as my fancy-dance pair. To top off this fantastically lucky turn of life, I took my meals at the truck stop, with Gram dishing up chicken-fried steak whenever I wished and Letty giving me a wink and asking, "Getting enough to eat, sonny boy?"

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Harv

keep my mind off the plaster sonofabitch of a prayer on the wall. Couldn't hurt, could help, I figured, visiting that world preserved in ink. School, ranch, town of Gros Ventre, the travel travails and triumphs of my Greyhound journey, all lay in the creamy pages in Kwik Klik inscriptions to remind me of those times and places, softened by memory.

As if it had a mind of its own, though, this time the album flipped open toward the front to something I'd quite forgotten was in there, Meredice Williamson's inscription right after Gram's. When I went up to the boss house to ask her to write in my proud new possession, the mistress of the Double W fluttered and fiddled as usual, claiming she couldn't think of anything worth putting on paper. But then she gandered around the big living room at the hide-and-head holdings of the Williamson men--she herself one of the trophies, according to Gram, a rich lawyer's widow Wendell collected in California--and in her drifty way came around to, "Oh wait, silly me, I do too. We skipped rope to it, when I was a girl in Beverly Hills."

As you strive, may you thrive, the lesson ever thus:

Money talks, flat broke walks, and small change rides the bus.

Reading that over sent a chill through me that had nothing to do with the climate of the drafty attic. The inviting album in which people left something of themselves was supposed to be a memory book, each page a spot of time where the person existed in ink as the greenhouse figures did in glass and shadow. But staring me smack in the face were words of prophecy, a moony mind behind them or not, that seemed to fit me skintight.

So frustrated that I took it out on the album, slapping it shut like slamming a door, I hunched there against the limp pillow with my predicament throbbing in me like one of Aunt Kate's headaches. Cusswords came to mind, but none covered the

situation. No matter how I looked at it, my fortune--in more meanings than one; it still preyed on me that Aunt Kate only had to have gone through my shirt pockets before doing the wash and my money still would be talking--the fair share of luck we all want, let's just say, had steadily petered out on me ever since I got off the dog bus. Or even earlier, if I really wanted to delve into signs of things going wrong, way back there on the Chevy bus from Gros Ventre when the hefty woman asked why I was squirming so and I had to alibi something about my good luck charm poking me in the pants even as I had to abandon the prized arrowhead into a coat pocket. Talk about a bad omen, that one was sharp and to the point, for sure.

Then something came to me like a tickle in the head. *Eye-dea*, as Herman would have summoned an inspiration out of thin air.

Random or not, the thought straightened me up off the pillow. People carried good luck charms for a reason, didn't they? *Carried* the thing that brought luck, that was the whole idea of making a charm work. Vaulting out of bed, I slipped into the beaded moccasins and went to my suitcase, anticipation bubbling in me.

For once, the embarrassing old suitcase was more like a treasure chest to be opened. There, nestled beneath a pair of socks, rested the arrowhead, blacker than coal and more lustrous than ebony. Remembering the sharp pokes in my pants, I picked it up very carefully, laying it flat in the palm of my hand so the bladed edges would not cut me. Catching the light of the bed lamp in a sheen as if polished and cool against my skin, the obsidian relic felt right in more ways than one, in my possession rather than grabbyguts Wendell Williamson having it. Hadn't he spent his entire sparrowheaded life on the Double W without finding it? More than ever I felt that the arrow point rightly belonged to me, with me. Had found me as much as I found it.

Rubbing it with a finger, I was back to being Red Chief, hunter along the creek rewarded with a wickedly beautiful weapon shaped by the hand of a fellow hunter in the olden time before Columbus. In the story everyone knows, Aladdin had his spellbinding lamp, didn't he. Well, I had this. How could I not think that the luck which led to spotting in the stony creek bottom a finger-long dark glassy rock, waiting and untouched in all that time, was a natural quality of the magical article?

Keeping the arrowhead on me was a far different matter. I stroked its slick surface, trying to figure out how I could possibly carry it as a charm with getting my rear end gouged off. Wrapping it in a handkerchief wouldn't be enough. I just about needed a leather glove to handle its lethal sharpness safely at all.

Or maybe the arrowhead needed the glove.

I sprang up, my mind racing to possibilities. Eleven going on twelve is an inventive age.

Inspired, I set the arrowhead aside on the dresser while I explored, turning first to the plywood closet at the back of the attic, where my jacket was stuffed in with stored-away winter clothing and such. I had to paw through quite a collection of what it took to survive Wisconsin in cold weather, but at last there was something like what I was searching for, way at the back of a top shelf behind a fur muff. A pair of thick mittens. Leather on the outside, lined inside with fur. Probably rabbit--an added element of luck right there, I bet.

Fondling the sizable mitts, I tried telling myself they were bound to be Herman's, but knowing better. Something of his would not be stashed with the ladylike muff, and everything about Aunt Kate was big, including her hands.

That the mittens might as well have had HERS written on them made me think twice, but I didn't stop there. Why not let the arrowhead settle the matter?

dressed
leather?
needs?
mink

Taking the mitts to the dresser, I ever so carefully tried slipping the arrowhead, point first, into the thumb of one. It fit snugly and securely. Perfectly.

That decided that. Now the next part. Mitten in hand, I cracked the door to listen for any sound downstairs. There was none whatsoever except that nighttime not-quite-stillness of the house holding people deep asleep. The arrowhead creating some luck already? With my moccasins on, quiet as a shadow I crept down and into to the sewing room. I didn't know what I was going to say if I got caught at this. Something would have to come. It usually did.

Almost the instant I entered the small darkened room, I blundered into the cot, barking my shin on the metal frame and causing a thump that seemed to me loud as thunder.

Sucking in my breath against the hurt, I froze in place for what seemed an interminable time, until I convinced myself the sleepers had not heard. By then my eyes adjusted to the dark and I could dimly pick out objects in the room. What I was after had to be somewhere in here. I hobbled over to where the sewing machine was located, near the window. Next to it was a low cabinet to hold thread and so on. And scissors, surely?

I felt around in the cabinet drawers, encountering spool after spool of thread and attachments for the sewing machine, until finally my fingers came across a little curved pair of the type called buttonhole scissors. Tiny as those were, they would have to do. With just enough moonlight through the window to see by, I worked at cutting the thumb off the mitten, the puny scissors pretty much gnawing through the leather and fur. But at last the thumb came off and I drew a breath of relief.

Just one more step to be done: The incriminating remainder of the mitt and its mate I would have to conceal under the trash in the garbage can in the morning, but I'd be up way earlier than anyone else, no problem. It seemed only fair, since that was where the Kate had tossed my shirt and money. As to what would happen

longest
time

Come on,
Aunt K,
stand &
sit in

Half
wholly

Where'd
you put
the scissors -
whatever it
is to cut
that m... ..

when winter came and she couldn't find the mittens, things got lost in closets all the time, right?

Who knows if luck had anything to do with it, but back upstairs, with the arrowhead ready and waiting in its ideal pouch, I slumbered so soundly that for once I would be telling Aunt Kate the absolute truth when I said I slept like a charm.

That next day, I floated through the morning and the household's usual ruckus, one hope after another lifting my spirit to a new height. With the arrowhead holstered there in my pants pocket within easy touch, I could imagine the summer turning itself on its head, with Aunt Kate changing her mind about pairing my rodeo shirt with her muumuu for the card party and taking me shopping for a new wardrobe, and she and Herman growing tired of battling at breakfast every morning, shutting up about how to eat toast if nothing else, and best of all, a letter arriving from Gram saying she was recuperating so fast her doctor had never seen anything like it, and as soon as I got back to Montana, we would get on life just like she promised, good as new. Under the spell of such a streak of luck, maybe it was not impossible that I'd get the hang of canasta, even.

It was a lot to ask of a piece of rock.

So there I sat, when afternoon brought a deluge of hearts and diamonds and clubs and spades, staring at the mixture of cards I was holding, waiting in vain for luck or anything like it to strike. If canasta lessons from Aunt Kate until then had been rocky, this afternoon's was an avalanche.

"Now then, Don-al," she'd pushed up to the card table, deck in hand as if making it behave, "it's time to get serious."

Right away I was caught off balance when she squared a score sheet next to the peanut brickle plate and declared we were going to play a full game against our

pretend opponents. The first team to 5,000 points, she informed as she dealt the cards whizzing across the table, would be the winner. I was staggered. Pitch when Gram and I played it was a perfectly simple game of high, low, game, jick, jack, and the joker, and the first person to twenty-one won. Canasta's astronomical number sounded like a life sentence at the card table.

Paying no heed to my stupefied expression, she finished off dealing with a *hmm-HMM-hmm* hum. "All righty right, we will show the girls"--said while tending to the piles of cards representing Herta and Gerda as well as her own mittful, multiple determination showing in her chins--"how the game should be played, mmm?"

After the first few hands, she and I now trailed those face-down sets of cards, 910 to 4100.

My frowning partner was pinching the place between her eyes more and more often, groaning at something I did or didn't do as people who weren't even there piled up the score against us. Commiserating with herself, she was popping brickle into her mouth as if it was only the peanuts. Myself, I was feeding on frustration, her constant coaching punctuated with impatient sighs that got on my nerves. I still say, her frame of mind from trying to play three hands of cards and still instruct me was as much to blame for what happened as my shortcomings as a canasta player.

"Dearie, you have to think ahead in building your hand, this isn't a game of roulette," she reached the point of saying peevishly when my pattern of draw and discard, such as it was, did not suit her.

Peeved right back, I invented "Honest, I'm trying to prognosticate." I had only a slippery grasp of the word, but I had heard Major Williamson use it when he seemed to be guessing about something, so I figured it must have brainpower to it.

Aunt Kate's lips twitched. "You had better concentrate along with it, big talker."

Trying to get something going, I had melded three sixes and then drawn a fourth one. Now the top card on the discard pile was yet another sixspot, so if I picked it up with the one in my hand and a wild card, I'd be well on my way to a canasta. That would show her I knew what was what in this damn game. With a vengeance, I flashed those two cards before dumping them onto the table with the melded ones and was reaching to scoop in the valuable sixth six and the discard pile when the voice across the table rose like a siren.

"No, no, no! Wake up, child. You can't take that without a natural pair."

"Huh? Why not?"

Rolling her eyes, she put a hand to the peanut brickle plate. Finding it empty, she bit off instead: "Because it's a rule. How many times have I gone over those with you? Mmm? Can't you put your mind to the game at all?"

At that, our eyes locked, her blue-eyed stare and my ungiving one right back. It didn't help that the long suit of both of us was stubbornness. I more than matched her outburst with my own.

"There are too many rules! This canasta stuff goes through me like green shit through a goose!"

I know it is the mischief of memory that my outburst echoed on and on in the room. But it seemed to. At first Aunt Kate went perfectly still, except for blinking rapidly. Then her face turned stonier than any of those on Mount Rushmore. For some seconds, she looked like she couldn't find what to say. But when she did, it blew my hair back.

"You ungrateful snot! Is this the thanks I get? That sort of talk, in my own house when I've, I've taken you in practically off the street? I never heard such--"

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Words failed her, but not for long. "Did you learn that filth from him?" She flung an arm in the direction of the greenhouse and Herman.

"No!" I was as shrill as she was. "It's what they say in the bunkhouse when something doesn't make a lick of sense." I was really, really tempted to let her have it again, by saying I wouldn't futz with that kind of language if it bothered her so. But for once, I knew when to shut up.

"Look around you, mister fellow," she blazed away some more. "This is not some unciviized bunkhouse on some piddling ranch in the middle of nowhere. Dorie must be out of her mind, letting you hang around with a pack of dirty-mouthed bums. If she or somebody doesn't put a stop to that kind of behavior, you'll end up as nothing more than--"

She didn't finish that, simply stared across the table at me, breathing so heavily her jowls jiggled.

"All right," she swallowed hard, then again, "all righty right. Let's settle down." If sitting there letting her tongue-lash the hide off me without so much as a whimper wasn't what might be called settled down, I didn't know what was. My tight lips must have told her so, because her tone of voice lessened from ranting to merely warning: "That is enough of those words out of you, understand?"

My face still as closed as a fist, I nodded about a quarter of an inch, a response she plainly did not like but took without tearing into me again. "That's that," she said through her teeth, and to my surprise, threw in her hand and began gathering in all the other cards on the table.

"I need to go and have my hair done, so we won't try any more cardsie-wardsie today." She fixed a look on me as I too readily tossed my hand in with the rest. "That gives us only tomorrow, because Saturday I have a million things to do around the house, and of course we can't play cards on Sunday." Heathen that she obviously thought I was, I didn't see why not, but I still kept my trap shut.

“Now then,” she shoved the cards together until they built into the fat deck ready for my next day of reckoning, “while I’m out, find something to do that you don’t have to swear a blue streak about.”

Naturally I resorted to Herman. As soon as I called out “Knock, knock” and sidled into the greenhouse, he saw I was so down in the mouth I might trip over my lower lip. Squinting over his stogie, he asked as if he could guess the answer, “How is the canasta?”

“Not so hot.” Leaving out the part about what went through the goose, I vented my frustration about endless crazy rules. “I try to savvy them, really I do, but the cards don’t mean what they’re supposed to in the dumb game. Aunt Kate is half mad at me all the time for not doing better, but I don’t know how.” I ended up dumping everything into the open. “See, she’s scared spitless her card party is gonna be a mess on account of me. So am I.”

Herman listened closely, nursing the cigar with little puffs while he thought. “Cannot be terrible hard,” he reasoned out canasta with a logic that had eluded me, “if the Kate and the hens can play it. Betcha we can fix.” Telling me, cowboy style by way of Karl May, to pull up a stump while he searched for something, he dragged out the duffel bag from the corner of greenhouse.

Dutiful but still dubious, I sat on a fruit box as ordered and watched him dig around in the duffel until he came up with a deck of cards that had seen better days and a well-thumbed book of Hoyle. “We reconnoiter the rules, hah?” A phrase that surprised me, even though I pretty much knew what it meant. But we needed more than a rulebook, I told him with a shake of my head.

“We’re still sunk. Aunt Kate and them play partners, so it takes two decks.”

“Puh. Silly game.” He swung back to the duffel bag, stopped short, turned and gave me a prolonged look as if making up his mind. Then thrust an arm in again. Scrounging through the bag up to his shoulder, he felt around until he grunted and produced another deck of cards even more hard-used than the first.

“The Kate is not to know,” he warned as he handed me the deck and pulled out a fruit box to serve as a table. “Man to man, yah? Here, fill up your eyes good.”

I was already bug-eyed. The first card, when I turned the deck over for a look, maybe was the queen of hearts all right, but like none I had ever seen--an oldtime sepia photograph of a woman grinning wolfishly in a bubble bath, her breasts out in plain sight atop the soapy cloud like the biggest bubbles of all.

With a gulp, I spread more of the cards face up on the box table, which meant breasts up, legs up, fannies up, pose after pose of naked women or rather as close to naked as possible without showing the whole tinger. Who knew there were fifty-two ways of covering that part up? That didn't even count the joker, a leggy blonde wearing a jester's cap and coyly holding a tambourine over the strategic spot.

“French Bible,” Herman defined the fleshy collection with a shrug, scooping the deck in with the tamer one and shuffling them together in a flash.

He had me read out canasta rules from Hoyle while he dealt hands of fifteen cards each as if four of us were playing, the same as Aunt Kate had just tried, but that was the only similarity, the cards flying from his fingers almost faster than the eye could follow. I was heartened a little to hear him let out an exasperated “Puh” at the various rules that threw me. After scooping up his hand and studying it and then doing the same with the other two and mine, he instructed me to sort my cards into order from kings--in the girly deck, even those were naked frolickers around a throne or doing something pretty close to indecent with a crown--on down, left to

“But I don’t know Aunt Kitty and him,” I rushed on. “I’ve never even seen a picture. And what if they don’t recognize me at the bus station back there and we miss each other and I get lost and--”

Gram cut me off with a look. As red-headed as a kid could be, a wicker suitcase in hand, I was not especially likely to escape notice, was I. No mercy from her on the rest of it, either. “I seem to remember,” she said flatly, “telling you not five minutes ago that I wrote down their address and phone number and tucked it in your memory book, just in case. Quit trying to borrow trouble, boy.”

“Yeah, well, I still don’t know them,” I muttered. “Why couldn’t they come in a car and get me, and see you and help you go to the hospital and things like that?”

This caused her to pause. “Kitty and I didn’t always make music together, from girls on,” she finally came up with, hardly the most enlightening of explanations. “The great Kate, you’d think her full name was back then, the stuck-up little dickens,” she sighed, sad and exasperated in the same breath. “She always did have her own ways, and I had mine, and that was that. So we haven’t much kept in touch. I didn’t see any sense in trying, until now,” Gram drew what seemed to be another hard breath, “because when that sister of mine gets a certain notion in her head she can’t be budged. I suppose that’s how she’s got to where she is in life. And your Uncle Dutch is”--a longer pause--“something else.”

Whatever that was supposed to mean, she lost no time changing the subject, saying my big trip was a chance that did not come often in life, really, to get out in the world and see new sights and scenes and meet people and have experiences and all that. “You could call it a vacation, in a way,” she tried hopefully.

from
what I
hear

“It’s vacation *here*,” I pouted, meaning school was out and I had the run of the ranch and could do pretty much what I wanted without being shipped off to complete strangers back east in Wisconsin.

“Oh, Donny,” she groaned and let loose with, “I swear to Creation, I don’t know up from down anymore,” one of her standard sayings when things became too much for her. Outbursts of that sort scared the daylights out of me at first, but I had learned such squalls passed as quickly as they came. Certain complaints gathered on a person with age, it seemed. This woman who meant everything to me carried the burden of years and deprivation along with all else life had thrust on her, including me. As much as I adored her and tried to fit under her wing without causing too much trouble, my grandmother was from another universe of time, another century, actually. My six grades of schooling already were twice what she ever received in the sticks of North Dakota, if North Dakota even had sticks. She read recipes with her finger, her lips silently moving, and had to call on me to help out with long words such as *pomegranate*. Not that she lacked a real vocabulary of her own, for besides sayings that fit various moods and occasions, she possessed a number of expressions that edged right up to cussing, without quite qualifying. The way she’d meet something dubious with “That’s a load of bulloney” always sounded to me suspiciously close.

At least she didn’t resort to any of that now, instead telling me to temper my attitude in what for her were measured terms. “It’s not the end of the world,” a look straight at me came with the words. “School starts right after Labor Day, you know that, and this is only till then. Kitty”--she loyally amended that--“your Aunt Kitty will make sure you’re back in time, and I’ll be up and around by then, and we’ll get on with life good as new, you wait and see.”

Cut
Oh, Donny
&
more
& swear...
➤

“Never you mind. They’ll have regular slippers there, like as not,” she fibbed, I could tell. “And after”--staying turned away from me, she busied herself more than necessary tucking the moccasins into the suitcase--“the nuns will see to things, I’m sure.”

After. After she had some of her insides taken out. After I had been sent halfway across the country, to a place in Wisconsin I had never even heard of. My voice breaking, I mustered a last protest. “I don’t want to go and leave you.”

“Donal, you could have talked all day and not said that.” She took off her glasses, one skinny earpiece at a time, to wipe her eyes. “I’d rather take a beating than have to send you off like this.” She blinked as if that would make the glistening go away, and my own eyes stung from watching. “But these things happen, that’s how life is. I can hear your granddad now, ‘We just have to hunch up and take it.’” Gram kept in touch with people who were no longer living. These were not ghosts to her, nor for that matter to me, simply interrupted existences. My grandfather died long before I was born, but I heard the wise words of Pete Blegen many times as though he were standing close beside her. Straightening herself now as if the thought of him had put new backbone in her, she managed a trembling smile. “Nell’s bells, boy, don’t worry so.”

I didn’t give in. “Maybe I could just go to the hospital with you and the nuns would let me live with them and--”

“That’s not how something like this is done,” she said tiredly, “don’t you understand at all? Kitty and Dutch are the only relatives we have left, like it or not. You have to go and stay with them for the summer while I get better,” she put it to me one last time in just so many words. “You’ll do fine by yourself,” she maintained. “You’re on your own a lot of the time around here anyway.”

She maybe was persuading herself, but not me. “Donny, please,” she begged, reading my face, “it is all I can think to do.”

Don't be
(a handful)
please
such

cut
please

“You said it,” said Pooch, taking the bottle next in both hands and duplicating Fingy’s swig.

By now I was nervously glancing out into the dark, wondering what was delaying Herman and kicking myself for not going with him into town and keeping him out of trouble, or at least being on hand when it happened. Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, could even the remotest of towns like Wisdom conceivably be plastered with MOST WANTED posters, and he’d been thrown into whatever stony lonesome the Big Hole held? I was torn, between holding our spot in the campfire community and plunging into the darkness to go searching for him. What was worse, scared stiff about either one, pinned to my place on the log because deciding either way seemed worse than the other.

Meanwhile the hoboos were loosened up by the circulating bottle of ‘Bird and another that magically appeared out of some other bindle, to the extent there was now a general demand, “C’mon, Shakespeare, give us one.”

“My kingdom for a source,” that individual half comically half dramatically put a hand to his brow as if seeking inspiration. Mimicking a high-powered thinkerer--or maybe there was no mimicking to it, with him--he pondered aloud, “Now what immortal rhyme would a distinguished audience of knights of the road wish to hear, I wonder?”

“Quit hoosiering us and deliver the goods, Shakey,” Highpockets prodded him.

“As you like it, m’lord,” the response pranced out, over my head and probably all the others as well. Crossing his legs and leaning on his knees with his arms, the learned hobo lowered his voice confidentially enough to draw his listeners in, me included.

“There was an old lady from Nantucket,”

only
grabbing
done was
fetching
into

Jones took one more look at Herman, sitting there with a horsy grin skewed up toward his glass eye. "Okay," he dragged the word out, "let's see how they do it in the old country. Scotty, go get the milk pails for him."

Need I say, the breakfast table was abandoned in a hurry and the barn gained a full audience to watch Herman take on Waltzing Matilda.

Dairy cows normally plod willingly to their stanchions, ready to stick their necks into captivity in exchange for being relieved of their milk. The other two cows did so, nice and docile, when Herman and I herded them in to the milking area, while the angular brown and white Guernsey lived up to her name by sort of dancing sideways and snorting a shot of snot toward us and the stanchion. Bawling like she was being butchered, Waltzing Matilda then backed into a corner and rubbed a stub of horn on the barn wall as if trying to sharpen it.

"So-o-o, bossy," Herman approached her using the handle of a pitchfork to prod her out of the corner. I crept along right behind him, wishing he had used the sharp end of the pitchfork as the cow eyed us malevolently. Giving another snort, Waltzing Matilda plowed past the two of us as we jumped back and, as if it was her own idea, plugged along to the waiting stanchion.

"There, see, that's half the battle!" Jones called from the safety of half the barn away, where he and the rest of the crew were clustered to watch.

"Stand away," Herman warned me as he sidled in to shut the stanchion on the cow's bowed neck. I thought I was, but still had to leap away when Waltzing Matilda shifted hind feet, flashing a kick that would have taken out a person's kneecap.

"Jeezus," Peerless cried, "watch yourselves, fellas. That critter's a killer."

Herman and I would not have disagreed with that as we huddled to consider our next move. "Any eye-dea?" he started to ask, interrupted by Waltzing Matilda

Crew support

Faced with our crew's total backing of Herman, the Tumbling T outfit looked uneasily at one another, but when Deacon said, "C'mon, don't let these 00s buffalo us," they all matched our bets. Just like that, more than a hundred dollars lay in a green stack on the bar.

The beer vendor protested. "Let's don't get carried away here. The gent has done what he said he could, and--"

"Six glasses again, same beers. But this time, we hold back the sixth one as the hole card, he don't get to taste it. That way, there ain't no guessing it there at the end. ⁽¹⁾

"Time to quit piddling around. I got ten to your twenty that he can't do them all, one right after the other. We'll see how good his...

"Nothing against PeeWee"--that again! I could have been put on trial for the murderous look I gave him--"but I want to handle them shot glasses and slips of paper myself, starting behind there at the taps. Just so there's no wrong impression of anything funny taking place along the way."

"A

Herman held up a hand for silence.

"You mind, Ernie?"

The bartender backed away to lean against his cash register. "Since you're paying full price for shot glasses of beer, you can keep on all night for all I care."

"One more thing. We want him blindfolded."

Herman, or "You got half blindfold for one-eyed person?"

Herman reached up to take out his glass eye until I grabbed his arm. "No, don't. Give us a spoon, he'll show you."

see p. 138

"Convinced now, Deacon.

*H
Delayed
w/ it*

Herman, or “You got half blindfold for one-eyed person?”

Herman reached up to take out his glass eye until I grabbed his arm. “No, don’t. Give us a spoon, he’ll show you.”

“Convinced now, Deacon.

“Yea, but we still want him blindfolded, in case he’s picking up signals from the kid here somehow with that peeper he’s got left.”

“Is all right, Pockets. I do not need to see to take fool’s money.”

“There’s our money, Deacon. Decorate the mahogany.”

Deacon made a big deal of drawing the six small glasses of beer, peeking at the slips of paper and arranging the setup on the bar, five glasses in a row in front of Herman and the hold card one, so to speak, back by the taps. “There you go

The last one I couldn’t even guess at.. A darker foamy brew had to be either Highlander or Mother Lode, but with everything riding on Herman’s final feat of swilling a mouthful and identifying it, fifty-fifty odds all of a sudden didn’t seem anything like a cinch. But quite nonchalantly for a tipsy person wearing a blindfold, he put out his hand to receive the last shot glass. “Ready on firing line. Bottoms up.”

As soon as I positioned the shot of beer in his hand, he chugged it too much, more of it going down him than the other beers had. Not for long, because what was left in his mouth he spewed onto the bar, his face contorted. Gagging and trying to speak, he was making a *k-k-k* sound like a car trying to start on a cold morning, as our crew watched in horror, me most of all. Whatever was wrong with him was calamity enough, but I could also see our wages about to vanish in front of our eyes.

“Told you,” Deacon crowed. “Wore out his gullet after so many beers. Let’s have that money and we’ll even buy you a consolation round, Pockets,” he couldn’t hide his smirk.

“Herman, what is it?” I quavered in panic as he kept trying to work his throat. “What’s wrong?” Not knowing what else to do, I slammed him across the top of his back with my open hand as hard as I could.

The blow must have loosened up something somehow. “K-k-k-cough drop,” he spluttered, pointing shakily at the offending shot glass.

“Deacon, you cheating bastard,” Highpockets caught on to the dodge ahead of the rest of us, but not by much. “Grab him.” Harvey already had accomplished that, locking the protesting Deacon to his chest from behind as casually as gathering an armful of hay. “Frisk him good,” Highpockets ordered, Midnight Frankie and Blackie quick on the job. Into sight came an orange box bearing the words LUDEN’S MENTHOL COUGH DROPS LEMON FLAVOR.

“I’d say you just forfeited, Deacon,” Highpockets pronounced, while I snatched off Herman’s blindfold as he stayed bent over the bar, wheezing and still trying to clear his voicebox.

“Can’t you take a joke?” Deacon squawked in Harvey’s steely grip. “Let’s call it a draw and just scrap the bet.”

“Draw, my rosy red butt,” that brought Peerless into it in full mode. “You can’t pull a fast one like that and crawl out of it like a snake on ice.”

His Tumbling T equivalent argued right back. “Hey, your fella tumbled to the cough drop, but he never did name the beer. So by rights, we win the bet.”

“Tell it in church, ye whistledick,” the Jersey Mosquito put a stop to this. “We’re claimin’ the pot fair and square,” he declared, whipping off his hat and scooping the pile of money into it. Then with surprising agility, he hoisted his bony old rump onto the bar, swung his legs over as a couple of Tumbling T gang

made futile grabs at him, and disappeared down among beer barrels and such, clutching the hatful of cash to him.

That set off general mayhem.

Each crew charged at the other, swearing and squaring off. Harvey seemed to be in his element, flooring one Tumbling T opponent with a roundhouse punch and taking on the next without drawing a breath. Fingy and Pooch between them were fending with a burly member of the other crew. As befitted their leadership positions Highpockets and Deacon singled each other out, locked together in a revolving grapple along the length of the bar that sent beer glasses shattering and stools tumbling like dominoes. Peerless and Midnight Frankie each were honorably engaged in tussles of their own with Tumbling T bettors yowling for their money back.

Meanwhile I saw that the bartender, repeating "Goddamn it, settle down!" to no effect, had pulled out a pool stick sawed off to the right length to make a good club and was starting around the end of the bar to put it to use.

Seeing this was getting serious, I tugged at Herman for us to scoot out of there. Blinking his eye at the melee around him, he resisted my pulling, saying thickly, "Wait, Donny, I have to help fellas fight."

"You've had your war," I gritted out and hauled at him with all my might, yanking him off the bar stool in the direction of the door. In my death grip on his arm, he stumbled after me as we skinned along the bar, ducking and dodging swinging fists and reeling bodies as much as we could, out into the street and to the pickup.

After manipulating him into sitting on the running board, with him still protesting that he wanted to join the battle that could be heard raging on in the Watering Hole, I said loudly and clearly: "Don't move. Sing a song. Time for Goethe to lift up the soul."

“Good eye-dea,” he said dreamily, and began to croon to himself in German.

With him established there, I raced off and into the Merc.

Lon Ames was chucking an armload of loaves of bread onto the counter while the storekeeper kept tally. Before he could ask what my rush was, I stammered, “The fellas are ready to go back to the ranch.”

“What, they drank the town dry already?” He turned away to grab boxes of macaroni off a shelf. “Tell them I’ll be there by the time they can piss the beer out of themselves. I’m not stopping every two minutes on the way to the ranch so somebody can take a leak.”

“Uhm, if you could hurry. They’re sort of in a fight.”

Lon swore blue sparks into the air, told the storekeeper to load the groceries in the back of the pickup and put the bill on the Diamond Buckle tab, then took off at a high run for the bar, with me trying to keep up.

“STOP IT!” he roared before he was even half through the doorway. “Or I’ll see to it that every one of you sonofabitches of both crews is fired and your asses run out of town before morning!”

That put a halt to everything, except a belated “Yow!” from Peerless who had received a late whack from the bartender’s pool stick. Sitting on Deacon’s chest where he had him pinned to the floor while they arm-grappled, Highpockets looked down at his adversary. “Your call.”

Deacon squirmed as much as he could, very little, then managed to turn his head toward Lon. “Since you put it that way, we’re peaceable.”

“Us, too,” Highpockets agreed, climbing off him. “You heard what the man said, boys. Let’s take our winnings and evaporate out of here. Right,

Skeeter?" He whirled around, looking in every corner. "SKEETER? Where the hell did he and that hatful of money go?"

The Jersey Mosquito popped up from behind the far end of the bar, grinning devilishly and holding the upside-down hat as if it were a pot of gold. "Just bein' our Fort Knox till you fellas got done socializin'. See you on the Ma and Pa sometime, Deacon," he called over his shoulder as he scampered out of the bar to jump in the pickup.

"No, that's okay, we'll ride in back."

The crew piled into the box of the pickup, Lon counting us with chops of a hand like you do sheep. He came up one short. "Who's missing?"

Skeeter giggled. "Sweeney, natcherly."

"Where the hell is the knothead?"

Silence. Until somebody in the cluster of us provided:

"Getting his ashes hauled."

That puzzled me, but not Herman, who let out a wild drunken laugh. Revelation came when Highpockets swiped a hand toward the sheepwagons where the sales ladies had set up shop. "He said he had a lot of Butte nookie to catch up on, Lon. Wouldn't even come and have one drink with us."

Catching a second wind of swearing, Lon clambered into the driver's seat, saying Sweeney could screw his brains out and walk back to the ranch for all he cared.

The ride to the Diamond Buckle was riotous, as fight stories were traded on their way into legend. You would have thought the Watering Hole was the Little Bighorn, and our crew was the victorious Indians. Meanwhile under the watchful eye of Highpockets the jackpot winnings was being counted out by Skeeter, hunched over so the cash would not blow out of his hat and carefully holding up

greenbacks one by one in the moonlight to determine whether they were fivers or sawbucks, doling out the proceeds of the bet evenly among us. Fingy clutched his with all eight fingers as if he could not believe his good fortune. Pooch burst into more words than he ordinarily issued in a week: "First time we ever come back from town with more moolah than we went in with."

"Hee hee, stick with me and I'll have you boys livin' on the plush," Skeeter took all due credit. He judiciously handed a fistful of money to me instead of Herman, slumped against the back of the pickup cab singing softly to himself in German. "Here be your and his share, Snag."

I steered Herman to his bunk

dangerous. Because whenever I tried to conceive of life without Herman, my imagination failed me.

At breakfast, black coffee was the main course as hangovers were nursed. Herman looked not much the worse for wear, an advantage he had by always looking harduysed. Lon 00ed at the empty chair next to his.

"Sweeney is no longer employed at the Diamond Buckle. I need a volunteer to be choreboy until I can get into Dillon and find a new one."

Peerless lawyered that practically instantly. "That would include getting a milk pail under Waltzing Matilda?"

"She's a cow," Lon tried to circle past that, "so she needs tending to like the others."

"I'm not milking any loco cow," Peerless stated his principle.

Grinning, Fingy waved a hand lacking enough fingers to squeeze a teat. "I'm out."

"I'm allergic to titted critters," Skeeter announced, drawing a volley of hooty speculations about how far that allergy extended and where it had set in.

“Damn damn damn it,” the foreman seethed, “all in hell I’m asking is for some one of you to pitch a little hay to the horses, slop the hogs, gather the eggs--”

“--and milk an animal you won’t go anywhere near yourself,” Peerless inserted with a smirk.

“Now listen here,” Lon tried to shift ground from that accusation, “it’s only for a couple of days. It won’t hurt--embarass any of you to do it that long.” A foreman is not supposed to be vulnerable to anything, even the truth he was trying to sneak past. I felt some sympathy for him as one by one, the rest of the crew shook off Lon’s appeals for someone, anyone, to do the chores, roadblocked from the start by Waltzing Matilda.

Actually, I had a bit of experience at milking under my mother’s tutelage during one of our holed-up-to-get-by seasons while my father was out looking for bulldozer work, and might have been moron enough to tackle this cow situation to show off my prowess, but some inner angel of good sense told me to sit there on my bunk with my mouth closed.

Finally Lon looked pleadingly at the one last figure that gave him any hope. “Pockets, can’t you--?”

Highpockets was as firm as the others, in shrugging off the suggestion he wield his influence. “The boys are in their rights. We hired on to put up hay. Nothing else.”

Whether it was that or inspiration circling until I could catch up with it, I suddenly realized. The job of choreboy would not end with haying. Before the chance was lost, I crept my foot over to Herman’s nearest one and pressed down hard on the toe of his shoe, causing him to jerk straight upright on the bunk. Now that I had his attention, I cut a significant look toward Sweeney’s empty bunk. He followed my gaze and after a squint or two, my thinking.

Clearing his throat as if he had been saving up for this announcement, Herman spoke out. "Nothing to worry. I am champ milker. Famous in old country."

"You are? I mean, are you." Lon turned to me, as he so often did when it came to figuring out Herman.

"Yeah, well, if Gramps says he can do a thing," I put the best face on that I could, "he can generally pretty much do it."

Lon took one more look at Herman, sitting there by me with his wrists hanging out of his too-short sleeves and a horsy grin skewed up toward his glass eye. "Okay," he dragged the word out, "let's see how they do it in the old country. Scotty, go get the milk pails for him."

Need I say, the bunkhouse emptied out and the barn gained a full audience of spectators to watch Herman take on Waltzing Matilda.

"No betting," Highpockets decreed, to the evident disappointment of Skeeter.

"So-o-o, bossy,"

Waltzing Matilda shifted hind feet, flashing a kick that would have taken out a person's kneecap while she was at it.

"Jeezus," Peerless cried, "watch yourself, One Eye. That 00's a killer."

"Telled you the cows lived downstairs."

"I am choreboy for good. More wages, a little," he held his thumb and first finger apart just barely.

"It is a good spot for me, after you go to gymnasium. Excuse me all over, school."

“Where the hell is the knothed, at prayer meeting?”

Silence. Until someone in the cluster of us provided in a hushed voice:

“Getting his ashes hauled.”

That puzzled me, but not Herman, who let out a wild drunken laugh.

Revelation came when Highpockets swiped a hand toward the sheepwagons where the sales ladies had set up shop. “He said he had a lot of Butte nookie to catch up on, Lon. Wouldn’t even come and have one drink with us.”

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foreman rousts the bunkhouse: "It's time to get up and pay for your bed."

--Queen, a high-headed smart old mare, about could operate the stack man that way by herself, tugging sleepy Bingo along with her--

"How's the crew, Lonnie?"

"Pretty much the usual.

He spotted me. "Who do we have here?"

"We saw you at Crow Fair."

"Did you now." Rags showed a long-jawed grin.

Herman gave him a handshake that made him wince.

"Hey, be careful. That's the hand I dance with."

"King's Hex. You rode him until the whistler."

"I'm a fortunate old kid. That hoss was part fish." He initiated with his hand the way a fish would jump straight ahead, in a series. "Looked a lot harder to stick onto than he was."

To the hayfield. This unforgettable summer... We got down to it.

The hay crop was gorgeous. Lon Ames... "You know what's said about Montana. Any good year has to provide for all its poor relations." But you could tell he was pleased, and in the good weather and bountiful windrows the crew turned into haymaking fiends, the loaf-shaped haystacks rising in the fields...Some days we skidded the beaverslide to three new fields...

grindstone with pedal

Harvey at table: "That tastes like more."

It showed that bad, did it.

Montana weather is always in a hurry.

The rodeo star ranch owner.

The whole crew ate with gusto, and Harvey ate with something beyond that.

“Day off. It’s raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock.”

“Karl May did not make that saying, I betcha”

The bottle battle...

“This is Wisdom, fella. A whiskey town. Stuff strong enough to draw a blister on a boot. A-Number One sheepdip.”

“Oh, blow it out your bunghole, 00. If the gent wants beer, I go through fifteen kegs a week here.”

“Uh, if anybody here is a betting man, my granddaddy here has two bucks against your one that says he can taste any of these beers blindfolded and tell you which one it is.”

“Are you sure your name isn’t Howie?”

“No, honest, it’s...”

“As in, Howie you going to pull my leg next?”

“Just up to--”

“--the Pope’s petticoats, yeah, yeah.”

half-closed eyes in his ruttled face.

“Time to quit piddling around. I got ten to your twenty that he can’t do them all, one right after the other. We’ll see how good his...”

The beer vendor protested. “Let’s don’t get carried away here. The gent has done what he said he could, and--”

Herman held up a hand for silence.

Herman gave a big belch of satisfaction.

Bartender pours. "There you go, May the best tongue win."

"I'll be a speckled bird. How do you do that?"

Herman was getting pretty well schnockered

"Gimme some sheepdip."

cough drop?

"Come again?"

"I solid mean it."

"What do you know for sure?"

"Precious little, and little that's precious."

It was the mean little sheriff from Glasgow.

He looked at me from under his load of hat.

"I thought you was going to see relatives. Back east someplace."

"Here's--here's my uncle right here."

"Just where do you fit into this, Bosephus?"

"Herman. I am Scotty's uncle."

"You sure sound like it," the sheriff said cynically.

"I don't give a big rat's ass about that."

Rags: "What seems to be the diffewculty?"

other sheriff responds, tells Kinnick this is Rags Rasmussen.

"No crap?" The sheriff took in Rags. "Saw you ride at the Calgary Stampede. You do know how to stick on a horse."

"It's a living," Rags replied, glancing at the badge on Kinnick's narrow chest. He turned to the other lawman. "What is this, Al, a sheriffs' convention? Should I be charging rent?"

"Sheriff Kinnick's from up at Glasgow. He's got a warrant for your stack man."

Rags looked at 00. "How about if we give you three or four other guys from the crew for Harv, straight across. It'd be equal in the amount of work they each put out."

The Glasgow sheriff forced a chuckle. "Let's get down to the pussy purr here."

"You got a sheet of paper to back that up?" Rags asked. The sheriff grumpily handed over the warrant and Rags read it all the way through, looking up when he got to the bottom. "What did I hear your name is?"

"They're brothers!" I blurted. "I heard them both say so."

"That right? Spit in your milk, did he?"

"That don't matter."

"And you don't have anything better to do than track me down across half the state."

"He broke out of jail."

"Told you he's a hard worker," Rags said mildly. "What were you in for?"

"Fightin' in a bar."

Harvey aside, every man there gave Sheriff Kinnick a sideways look. Rags rubbed his jaw and spoke the common thought. "Something like that means you could arrest everybody on the place, starting with me."

"That's as may be," the little sheriff muttered, glancing around at the ring of faces, "but none of you acted up like that in my jurisdiction. I'm only interested in

this knothed. C'mon, Harv, let's go get you some free board and room in lovely Wolf Point."

Harvey folded his arms on his chest. "Nothin' doin'."

"God damn it," the sheriff exploded, "if you do the crime, you're supposed to do the time! That's practically in the Bible. Now get in the patrol car. Front seat. Leave room in the back for other customers," he checked on Herman and me.

"Still nothin' doin'," Harvey declared, not budging. "That jurisdiction you talk about--it maybe's slipped your mind I busted out of jail in Wolf Point, and that's not in your county, the way I see it."

The Glasgow sheriff scowled. "You're turning into a regular jailhouse lawyer, are you, all the experience you're getting behind bars." He poked his hat higher on his head to try to look taller as he faced Harvey. "I'm taking you in for violating my custody, not once but twice when I packed you over there to the Wolf Point calaboose. Like I'm gonna do again."

Listening hard, the sheriff from Dillon appeared uneasy but didn't say anything. Harvey did, though. "Carl, I'll go with you on one condition. I serve my sentence, how much was that again?"--

"Forty-five days," his step-brother lawman answered peevisly.

"Jeezus, for fightin' in a bar?" one of the hoboes on the crew said.

"Plus whatever the judge throws at you for jailbreaking," Sheriff Kinnick said, glaring around at the audience.

--"in your jail there in Glasgow. That way, Janie can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won't have to bust out." He gazed at the smaller man. "If you won't do that for me, you'll have to shoot me to take me."

The mention of a smoke wagon .

The Dillon sheriff had taken two steps back. "Unless he attacks you, I'm not in this."

“Sounds like a pretty fair deal to me,” Rags chipped in, the crew backing him with murmurs of agreement.

Sheriff Kinnick had dropped a hand toward his gun butt, but not quite touching it. He cast another glance around at the bunch of us, his hand twitching, then he let it fall to his side. “Okay, loverboy, Glasgow and Janie it is.” “That still leaves this pair.”

“J. Edgar, you and me need to palaver,” Rags drawled. He jerked his head toward the horse corral and ambled off to it. Sheriff Kinnick’s face darkened, but he pivoted to follow Rags, warning over his shoulder, “Don’t try to quit the country while my back is turned, Harv.” With a straight face Harvey responded he wouldn’t think of escaping right out in the open. Actually, hightailing off into the sagebrush was on my mind. Where we stood watching, though, Herman’s hand had gripped my shoulder when he heard *palaver*. I wasn’t so sure any amount of talking to the mean little sheriff could help us, dead-set as he was to clap me in a foster home and haul Herman off to whatever they did to enemy aliens. Rags was speaking softly to the horses and feeding them sugar cubes by the time the sheriff joined him at the corral, and the soft drawl that the crowd of us could not quite hear clearly now was directed at the sheriff. After a little of that, the sheriff was the one rubbing his jaw. He edged closer to Rags and said something so low we couldn’t catch it. Rags drew his head back and looked down at him with not a favorable expression, but after a moment stuck his hand out. They shook, and headed over to us, the sheriff strutting beside Rags’ long-legged stride.

“Let’s get your stuff and hit the road, Harv.” He turned to Herman and me. “On second thought, these yahoos aren’t my worry.”

“I have to go up and enter the bronc ridin’ at the Glasgow rodeo.” “And beforehand, ride at the head of the parade through town right next with that peewee sheriff to help his election chances.”

“Now let’s sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I’ve let on the ranch. Come on up to the house.”

“Cook? You don’t say.” Mrs. 00 is only with us through haying.”

At the end of haying, when Highpockets and the Jersey Mosquito and Blackie and the others were borne away by the dog bus to other harvests, other seasons, we stayed.

“Uh, if anybody here is a betting man, my granddaddy here has two bucks against your one that says he can taste any of these beers blindfolded and tell you which one it is.”

Bartender pours. “There you go, May the best tongue win.”

“I’ll be a speckled bird. How do you do that?”

Herman was getting pretty well schnoekered

“Gimme some sheepdip.”

“You got company, boys, Here comes the Tumbling T crew

There was no mistaking who was the Big Ole of this outfit of hoboes turned haymakers, a hawknosed sharp-eyed gent--I use that term loosely--with the same air of authority about him as Highpockets 00ed in our crew. until the Jersey Mosquito called out to the Tumbling T’s main man, “Deacon! You old sidewinder, c’mon over here and pretend you’re social.”

“Herm--I mean, Gramps, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Has to wait. Pooch and me, we got big thoughts to think. Don’t we, podner.”

“Damn straight,” Pooch said mechanically.

“Yeah, but I really need to tell you--”

“Saturday night is to howl,” Herman formulated as if it had come from Longfellow or Goethe. “And lucky us, here we are, south of the moon, hah?” He shut me down with such a fond grin, for me, for the decorated saloon so much like the Schooner, for the company of our hobo pals, that I did not have the heart to tear him away. As he and Pooch lapsed back into their mute pleasure of imbibing, I began to catch the drift of the Jersey Mosquito’s earnest jawboning of the Tumbling T chief next to us.

“Haven’t seen you since we was in that boxcar on the Ma and Pa”--the Maryland and Pennsylvania Railroad in hobo nomenclature--“and that Baltimore yard bull came callin’ with a billy club in one hand and handcuffs in the other. I swear, Deac, never saw a man bail out the other side of a boxcar as fast as you. Left me to deal with that 00 by my lonesome, you sonofagun.”

“Every man for himself, like the elephant said as he danced among the chickens,” Deacon stated his philosophy smugly. The two of them batted boasts and putdowns back and forth like that until Skeeter sprung the trap I realized he had been baiting all along.

“I’m telling ye, Deacon, I know you think you’re a helluva drinkin’ man. But we got a fella who puts you to shame when it comes to lickin’ a glass. Our man here can take the least leetle sip of anythin’ captured in a bottle and tell you just what it is.”

“Skeets, you’re so full of it your eyes are turning brown,” Deacon dismissed that boast with a laugh.

“By the grace of whatever ain’t unholy, I swear it’s true, Deac,” Skeeter persisted. “Seen him do it with my own eyes.” Sensing a 00, Peerless had moved in and backed that with, “I’m a witness to that myown self. Damnedest stunt since Jesus turned ditchwater into muscatel.”

His interest piqued now in spite of himself, the Tumbling T haymaker peered along the bar at our crew carrying on in Saturday night fashion, hoisting drinks and gabbing as if they hadn’t seen each other for weeks. “Where’s this miracle of nature you’re bragging up?”

“Sittin’ right there

Herman drew himself up with pride. “Ja, is true.”

“Ask the kid here, it’s his granddaddy,” Peerless urged, “he’s got no reason to stretch the truth.”

“Oh, don’t he? He could catch it just from hanging around with the bunch of you.” Deacon “What’s your name, peewee?”

“Snag.” I had no trouble baring the dagger tooth.

Deacon wasn’t thrown easily. “Are you sure it isn’t Howie?”

“No, honest, it’s--”

“As in, Howie you going to pull my leg next?”

The Tumbling T crew laughed their fool heads off, while ours shifted their feet uneasily. Until with a fortifying gulp of his beer, Skeeter took charge. “Tell ye what we’re gonna do, Deac, if you got any guts left in that stewpot belly of yours. We’ll bet that our fella here can have a swig of any of these”--the sweep of his arm indicated the line of beer spigots half the length of the bar, as any serious Montana bar had--“let’s say, oh, half a dozen just to make it sporting, and tell you like that”--a snap of his fingers like a starter’s gun going off--“what every by God one is, without him knowing aforehand.”

Deacon took a second look at Herman, who gave him back a vague horsy grin, and it all of a sudden occurred to me I had been gone long enough on the telephone call for him to have more than a beer or two. “Hey, though, he’s already had--” I tried to warn Skeeter, but Deacon overrode me with the shrewd conclusion, “Beer gets to be plain old beer the more you drink of it. What do you think, boys? Shall we call this windjammer’s bluff?” That brought cries of “Hell, yeah! and “I’m in!” from the Tumbling T crew.

“This suit you okay?” Highpockets made sure with Herman.

“Ja, betcha bootsies,” said Herman, with a wink at me which I found alarmingly . “To a Tumbler T!”

“Ernie, set him up six of the Montana brews, shot glasses only,” Deacon directed. “We don’t want him swilling the stuff long enough to get familiar with it--the Muskeeter here claims he only needs a first swig anyway.” At the time I caught

"Goddamn it, quit," the bartender pulled out a sawed-off pool cue.

Ducking and dodging, I managed to reach Herman. "Wait, Donny, I have to help the fellas fight," he said thickly. I hauled at him with all my might and he stumbled after me, out of the bar and to the pickup. Establishing him on the running board, "Don't move.

I raced into the Merc.

"The fellas are ready to go back to the ranch."

"What, they drank the town dry already?" "Tell them I'll be there.

"Uhm, if you could hurry. They're sort of in a fight."

Lon Ames swore

The ride back to the ranch was riotous

"Gram, I have some things to tell you first."

"Such as, if it won't wait?

As fast as I could spill it out, I told her I was not in Manitowoc, hadn't been for weeks and weeks, Herman and I had hit the road because he couldn't get along with Aunt Kate and she had put me on the bus.... "They even fought about toast, and I was scared I'd be put in the orphanage when I got back where you were because

"Put you on the bus, that long ago? Donny, where have you been all this while?"

"Uhm, different places. Herman wanted to see some things and I wanted to along with. Gram, it went fine. He's, he's really something to travel with."

"Are you through? I hope?"

"Gram, I have something to tell you."

“Out with it, then. You sound like you have a lot on your mind.”

It took more than one try to say the hardest words of my life.

“I’m not coming. To Great Falls.”

...

“I can’t leave Herman. He needs me too much.”

“Then bring him, too.”

“That’s not a good idea. I can’t tell you why.”

“What on earth has got into you, Donny? Quit fiddle-faddling around and tell me where you are.”

“I-I can’t. If I do, you know you would come get me first thing.”

“I’d be entitled to, wouldn’t I.”

“I’ll come see you, if you want. Thanksgiving or Christmas or sometime.”

“Have you lost your senses? What about school?”

“I can go here. A school bus runs right by the--place where I am.”

“Is he--doing something to you? To make you stay?”

“Not that at all. It’s like--he’s in another country, and needs me to sort of be his guide.”

“Gram, I’m, I’m going to hang up. This is nothing against you, honest. I’ll call you again sometime.”

“Donny, please, don’t--”

Those three hardest words to get past, I dropped the phone in its cradle. Then sat there sobbing to myself dry, although dangerous. Because whenever I tried to conceive of life without Herman, my imagination failed me.

It was the mean little sheriff from the first dog bus of all, back at the start of summer.

His first step out of the patrol car, he stopped short and looked at me from under his load of hat, all too much recognition registering in the apple-doll face. "Huh, I thought you was going to see relatives, punkin. Back east someplace."

Too flustered to think, I pointed at Herman. "Here's--here's one of those relatives, right here, see. He came west instead."

"Did he now." Sheriff Kinnick, as I couldn't help but remember his name was, sized both of us up in our shabby work clothes. "More running around with no visible means of support, from the looks of you and him. Pretty close to bumming, if you ask me." As I watched in alarm, he strode over to Herman, taking care not to step into a cow pie with his dainty boots. "Just where do you fit into this, Bosephus?"

"Fritz," Herman maintained, his good eye starting to tic. "Scotty's grandpa, I am."

"You sure sound like it, Scotch as all get out," the sheriff said cynically. "Malone," he spoke over his shoulder to the Dillon sheriff standing to one side in all this, "you ever seen this mug before? Seems to me I've laid eyes on--"

"Howdy, Carl. You out seeing the country?" Harvey materialized behind Herman at that moment, the rest of the crew fanned out behind him as they came drifting over from the horseshoe pit.

"Well, if it ain't the object of my affection," Sheriff Kinnick made a mock simper. "Harvey the Houdini of the stony loneseome. Took me a while to run you down, lunkhead, but here we both are, just like old--"

"Hey, Johnny Law," Highpockets spoke up, stepping in beside Harvey and Herman. "What's your beef? These fellas are with us," he indicated Skeeter and

Blackie and Peerless and Fingy and 00, ranged around him. "Members of the human race in good standing."

"I bet they are,"

"What seems to be the diffewculty?"

"Somebody else here you better meet," the other lawman introduced Rags.

"Jeezus, thanks for nothing, Malone," the Glasgow sheriff rocked back on his pointy heels a little, taking in Rags. "You didn't tell me this is his spread."

"You didn't seem to be in a frame of mind where it'd make any difference," his counterpart from Dillon said sourly.

"Saw you ride at the Calgary Stampede," the little sheriff told Rags as if that amounted to a private audience. "You do know how to stick on a horse."

"That pony was Snow Snake," Rags filled in like the professional he was, as the crew gathered closer around in curiosity. "Sort of a rubber buckler, not too tough to ride once you get used to the bounces."

Self-encouraged, the visiting sheriff strutted out loud with, "Did a little bronc stomping myself, when I wasn't much more than a snotnose kid." He jerked his head in my direction, outraging me. "Breaking saddle stock for folks on alfalfa farms up al;opng the Missouri, that sort of thing." Hearing a snicker from somewhere in the circle of onlookers, he reddened and backed down. "Of course, that don't quite stack up against your career."

"It's an honest living," Rags replied, glancing at the badge on Kinnick's narrow chest as if comparing not that favorably. He turned to the other lawman. "What is this, Mike, a sheriffs' convention? Should I be charging rent?"

"Sheriff Kinnick's from up at Glasgow. Seems like he's here to arrest your stack man."

Rags looked at the runty lawman. "Aw, no. How about if we give you a two or three other guys from the crew for Harv, straight across. A good stack man is hard to find."

That broke the ice briefly in the tense gathering, but Sheriff Kinnick immediately turned frosty again. "I didn't come this far for jokes. I been on the track of this lamebrain"--he pointed an accusing finger at Harvey, standing quietly there looking like--"every chance I get all summer. Talked to bus drivers until they was running out my ears, but I lost his trail in Butte. Then I got smart and asked myself who else makes regular runs to burgs off the beaten path. Beer truck drivers." The sheriff let out his mean little laugh. "You make sort of a conspicuous hitchhiker."

"You're barking up the wrong gum tree, big hat," Highpockets took that on, bringing no small challenge with his height as he stepped forward and confronted the much shorter wearer of the bdge. "Got the wrong man. I'll testify Harv's been with us following the harvests, California fruit to this here hay."

Give it to Sheriff Kinnick, he didn't give ground, ony snickered. "Nice try," he said up into Highpockets' face, "but no hearing judge in his right mind is gonna take the testimony of a drifter over the Wolf Point jailers who had Harv for company days on end when the fool wasn't busting out. Besides, you get in court and there might be some natural curiosity about your own propensity for law abiding or not."

Harv spoke up. "It's my 00, Pockets, thanks anyway."

The Glasgow sheriff forced a chuckle. "Let's get down to the pussy purr here."

“You got a sheet of paper to back that up?” Rags asked. The sheriff grumpily handed over the warrant and Rags read it all the way through, glancing up when he got to the bottom. “What did I hear your name is?”

“They’re brothers!” I blurted. “I heard them both say so.”

“That right? Spit in your milk, did he?”

“That don’t matter.”

“And you don’t have anything better to do than track me down across half the state.”

“He broke out of jail.”

“Told you he’s a hard worker,” Rags said mildly. “Harvey, what were you in for?”

“Fightin’ in a bar.”

Harvey aside, every man there gave Sheriff Kinnick a sideways look. Rags rubbed his jaw and spoke the common thought. “Something like that means you could arrest everybody on the place, starting with me.”

“That’s as may be,” the little sheriff muttered, glancing around the ring of faces, “but none of you acted up like that in my jurisdiction. I’m only interested in this knothed. C’mon, Harv, let’s go get you some free board and room in lovely Wolf Point.”

Harvey folded his arms on his chest. “Nothin’ doin’.”

“God damn it,” the sheriff exploded, “if you do the crime, you’re supposed to do the time! That’s practically in the Bible. Now get in the patrol car. Front seat. Leave room in the back for other customers,” he checked on Herman and me. “Got some WANTED posters in my bag, Malone, brought ’em for us to go through, just on the chance.”

“That’s real thinking,” the Dillon sheriff muttered.

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nothing
his eyes?

Off to one side, Highpockets said softly without moving his lips, "Skeeter," and the old hobo drifted off to the shop where Herman sharpened things.

"Still nothin' doin'," Harvey declared, not budging. "That jurisdiction you talk about so much--it maybe's slipped your mind I busted out of jail in Wolf Point, and that's not in your county, the way I see it."

The Glasgow sheriff scowled. "You're turning into a regular jailhouse lawyer, are you, all the experience you're getting behind bars." He poked his hat higher on his head to try to look taller as he faced Harvey. "I'm taking you in for violating my custody, not once but twice when I packed you over there to the Wolf Point stony lonesome. Like I'm gonna do again, damn it."

Listening hard, the sheriff from Dillon appeared uneasy but didn't say anything. Harvey did, though. "Carl, I'll go with you on one condition. I serve my sentence, how much was that again?"--

"Forty-five days," his step-brother lawman answered peevishly.

"Jeezus, for fightin' in a bar?" one of the hoboes on the crew said while others whistled in disbelief.

"Plus whatever the judge throws at you for jailbreaking," Sheriff Kinnick plodded on, glaring around at the audience.

--"in your jail there in Glasgow," Harvey "That way, Janie can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won't need to bust out." He gazed at the smaller man. "If you won't do that for me, you'll have to shoot me to take me."

"That can be arranged, too, according to this pistol."

The mention of a smoke wagon . Skeeter had distributed pitchforks, tines gleaming fresh from the grindstone. I itched to have one and Herman looked determined to take one if he had to. "Not them," Highpockets directed. "Harvey either." Skeeter floated by the three of us as if we didn't exist.

Highpockets

Lawman
of
mine

During this, the Dillon sheriff had taken two steps back. "Kinnick, this getting out of hand. Unless he attacks you, I'm not in this."

"Lon, 'c'mere by me. Somebody's to be witnesses if this cuts loose on innocent men on their way to pitch some hay and cut a little firewood."

"I tried to tell you, the Johnson family has its own rules."

"Sounds like a more fair deal to me," Rags chipped in, the crew armed with pitchforks backing him with noises of agreement. "I'll fill in as stack man, as long as Scotty promises not to bury me under a ton of alfalfa."

Looking around furiously at man after man with a tool that could stab hay but more than that, too, Sheriff Kinnick had dropped a hand toward his gun butt, but not quite touching it. He cast another glance around at the bunch of us, his hand twitching, then let it fall to his side.

Breathing hard, he faced Harvey. "I've got to put up with you under the same roof just like when we was kids, do I," he complained as if he'd been sentenced to his own jail. "Okay, loverboy, Glasgow and Janie it is." Trying to fluff himself up, he turned to his fellow sheriff and growled, "That still leaves this pair." He jerked a thumb at Herman and me. "Something more than jailbreaking is involved with them if I don't make my guess. Let's get at those posters, I kind of got a hunch I've seen the four-eyed one's puss before."

I knew it. He was out to get us, was going to get us. Our life together, our lives separately, was going to fizzle into separation and incarceration.

"Now let's don't get excited all over again here," Rags drawled, stepping in front of the pair of lawmen. "I have a better idea before you get to reading too much into faces. J. Edgar, you and me need to palaver." He jerked his head toward the horse corral and ambled off toward it. Sheriff Kinnick's face darkened, but he pivoted to follow Rags, warning over his shoulder, "Don't try to quit the country

while my back is turned, Harv.” With a straight face Harvey responded he wouldn’t think of escaping right out in the open. Actually, hightailing off into the sagebrush was on my mind. Where we stood watching, though, Herman’s hand had resumed its grip on my shoulder when he heard *palaver*. I wasn’t so sure any amount of talking to the mean little sheriff could help us, dead-set as he was to haul Herman off to whatever stony lonesome they threw enemy aliens into and clap me in the orphanage.

Rags was speaking softly to the horses and feeding them sugar cubes by the time the sheriff joined him at the corral, and the soft drawl that the crowd of us could not quite hear clearly now was directed at the sheriff. After a little of that, the sheriff was the one rubbing his jaw. He edged closer to Rags and said something so low we couldn’t catch it. Rags drew his head back and looked down at him with not a favorable expression, but after a moment stuck his hand out. They shook, and headed back to us, the sheriff strutting beside Rags’ long-legged stride.

“Get your stuff and we’ll head for Glasgow, Harv,” he said as if it had been his own idea all along. He turned to Herman and me with a sniff. “On second thought, these yahoos aren’t my worry.”

as Harvey fetched his bedroll from the bunkhouse and shook hands all around with the crew, all of them wishing him good luck and Skeeter assuring him forty-five days was a jail term a person could do standing on his head.

“I dealt myself out of it on the WANTED situation, back there. But that don’t mean you can’t take a peek at the posters and come back in a few weeks and--”

Harvey interrupted. “Carl, let it go. Or I’ll sing ‘Indian Love Call’ day and night in your own hoosegow.”

With a perfectly straight face, the sheriff from Dillon looked across the top of the patrol car at the more or less brothers and addressed the one with a badge.

“In the name of peace and quiet, I think I’ll just let those posters of yours go home with you. Let’s hit the road, shall we?”

Sheriff Kinnick swore and climbed in the front seat. The patrol car

“I have to go up and enter the bronc ridin’ at the Glasgow rodeo.” “And beforehand, ride at the head of the parade through town right next with that peewee sheriff to help his election chances.”

“Now let’s sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I’ve let on the ranch. Come on up to the house.”

“Cook? You don’t say.” He rubbed that lean jaw a certain way. “Mrs. 00 is only with us through haying, when she goes back to her natural habitat of. And come roundup, we’re gonna need a bull cook”

At the end of haying, when Highpockets and the Jersey Mosquito and Blackie and the others were borne away by the dog bus to other harvests, other seasons, Herman and I stayed. And stayed and stayed. Joined, yes, by Gram and Letty, and as Skeeter would have said, by the grace of whatever ain’t unholy.

They came to Wisdom not by Greyhound, of course, that last dog bus having run its course, but in a purple Cadillac, with Letty riding up front in the company of Rags, and Gram, no fool in these matters, perched in the back seat. I had started school, and I cannot begin to tell you how it elevated my standing when that big car pulled up

That’s the story, almost. By that I mean there have been many other chapters of life since I experienced the dog bus and all it took me to, that unforgettable summer, but none that capture memory, page by page, so indelibly. Childhood is not wasted on the young. It is the start of the history that attaches to each of us, the first letters of the signature on existence that we become.

And more right than she even knew, Kate Schmidt ...when she called me a storer, for that is how I have made my living--my life really. With my mouth. Some are told quickly. When Gram was gone (died), Herman (and I) stayed on at the Big Hole ranch... I traveled to Montana State College in Bozeman--of course, by Greyhound--and there met (a prof), another grownup who took me in. 00 was an auctioneer on weekends, and I picked up the chants from him. I was hired at the big livestock 00 in Billings, and then at Denver. It was back in the Big Hole, though, that my real break came--as announcer at the Wisdom Roundup, the annual rodeo taking place within sight of the willows where Herman and I jungled up with the hoboes.

From there, it was straight up. Rodeo contractor in that crowd..."You've got a helluva voice, and you seem to know which end of a horse...

Jackson Sundown in the last go-round at Pendleton. Bill Pickens bulldogging. Famed bucking horses that were never ridden. The seenus joke a thousand times. Madison Square Garden. Television amplified it all.

It happened not that long ago. We in the 00 crew had just pulled in to 00. I had just stepped off the bus, in this case the 00-long Bluebird Wanderlodge our announcing crew traveled in, to stretch my legs when someone over in back of the bucking chutes called out, "Scotty! I mean, Mr.Cameron. Can I get your autograph?"

barrel racer... buckle bunny. In boots and jeans and 00 shirt and lady cowboy blue as the sky, she was the complete package of western girl these days. redheaded as my own daughters. Her freckles were a nice 00 across her nose. Still a kid but a 00 one, seventeen or eighteen. She gave me a smile of the kind a man always remembers.

"Sure thing, ma'am," I replied, sounding old-fashioned even to myself. I have worked my way past calling young women of today "little lady" or anything

close--Rags Rasmussen could get away with it if he were still of this earth, but I can't--yet you have to call people something.

Has him sign rodeo program? "You don't carry an autograph album?"

"Oh, but I do. See, I'll (put on her computer; check w/ Marcella or Tiffany.)

"If I get in there," I half joked, meaning her 00, "I guess there's no getting out ever, huh?"

"You look like your picture (in Rodeo Hall of Fame)."

"Seen it, have you."

"You bet. I'm in there, too." (national high school champions)

I gave her a look. "You got there somewhat faster than me, what's the secret?"

another version: She congratulates him on Rodeo Hall of Fame upcoming ceremony. "I'm going to be there, too, with my folks.

I gave her a look. "You don't say. You got there somewhat faster than me, what's your secret?"

She shrugged prettily. "I'm going to MSU."

Now I had her pegged. Montana State's was always one of the best college rodeo teams.

She was in the second go-round of barrel racing. He notices her horse's name (same as WW workhorse).

"Queen. That's quite some name for a barrel horse."

"She's named after my favorite band. *We are the champions*," she sang, doing a dance move along with it that would have thrown my back out, "*of the world!*" You know it?"

"I do now." Some things change.

“I got her at the Denver Stock Show. You auctioned her, I don’t suppose you remember?” “I was eleven then. Going on twelve, more like.”

“I was that myself, once.”

horse named after favorite singer. Is something wrong?”

“I thought I recognized the name, is all.” same as WW workhorse)

Teutonic, with maybe not enough emphasis on the tonic this once. Herman thought of it from from Schwabian poet, I suppose, and my contribution besides fixing up his English as he translated aloud was to substitute (**change**) Palookaville for the German original, Bad Schniffelheim or something like that. It rests in the middle of the autograph book, so the pages fall open to it. It is written in Herman’s hand, but I’m pretty sure it was my truest verse.

When you take a look in your memory book

Here you will find the lasting kind,

Old rhymes and new, life in review,

Roses in the snow of long ago.

“That’s really nice, even if I’m not sure I get it all.”

“Don’t worry, angel. You will someday.”

###

No, damn it, a hobo. A hay hand.

We scrambled out of the culvert. The hiring had started.

"I figure some of you would just as soon not be seen in broad daylight."

"My crew is out of whack."

"Looking for a man who isn't allergic to hay and hard work."

A number of the hoboes got up on one knee. "What's the kip?"

"Stack man."

The hoboes sank back down. "A strong back and a weak mind, is what he means."

Harvey still seemed to be studying the first pronouncement. Slowly he unfolded. "S'pose that'd be me."

"You've stacked hay before?"

"Tons of it."

Inasmuch as any haystack held some tons, 00 was not as impressed as he might have been. "What's your name?"

"Harvey."

The foreman waited. "If that's the way you want it, I guess I can wait until your first paycheck to find out if that's a first name or a last."

"I need a couple of mowers and three buckrakers. too. Any of you ambitious enough for that?"

"Buckin'," Highpockets got his bid in, followed by the Jersey Mosquito. 00: "I can handle a mower team if they ain't runaways."

"Hey, wait. Don't you need a stacker team driver?"

"We do kind of favor horses over horsepower." He scanned Herman from his city shoes to his eyeglasses. "Nothing personal, but you don't exactly look like a horse wrangler to me."

"Not him, me."

“Just how old are you?”

I was perpetually being told I was big for my age. Wasn't it logical for my age to grow to catch up with the rest of me, in this instance? “Thirteen,” I said. He looked skeptical. “My next birthday.” The next after that, at least. An approximation.

“I can always use somebody who can work a team of horses.”

“Make you a deal. If I can't harness a team the way you like, you can fire me right away and we'll walk back to town.”

“Now you're talking about something.” “I can use somebody to grind sickles and fix breakdowns.”

“He can do that.” set off the tic at the corner of his glass eye, but Herman vouched, “Ja, can do.”

“All right, I'll give you a shot. “Lon Ames. And you're--?”

“Scotty.” He waited for more and I produced, “Scotty Zimmerman.”

“And what's his?”

“Uh, Gramps.”

“You got to do better than that.”

“Fritz Schultz, I am,” Herman spoke up, and if I kept a straight face, I don't know how. “I talk broken, but apprehend some, the English.”

I pitched in, “He means he savvies what you're saying.”

“That's news.” He looked at me and then at Herman. “You can talk American, but he can't? How'd that come to be?”

“My granddad is from the old country. See, he doesn't speak enough of our language for the horses to understand him.”

“What old country is that? I'd have thought Giddyup and Whoa were pretty much the same anywhere.”

“Switzerland.”

“No hooley? A yodeleer, is he?” He seemed entertained by the idea. “All right, you’re hired. Tell Grandpop he can be .” The mustached foreman turned back to the

“Youth and beauty up front with me. The rest of you, grab your plunder and jump in back.”

“That was good. Some Swiss speak German.”

“They do? I figured they talked Switzer or something. Whoo, that was lucky.”

“Luck is the star we steer by.”

I was “We’ve got it knocked.”

“Didn’t you see clasp in his hatband? The brand?”

The galoot salute, meaning No.

“It’s the Diamond Buckle. Guess who owns the ranch.”

“Is Rags around?”

“Naw, he’s at the Cheyenne rodeo. How’d you know the place is his? Most of these ‘boes could be working for Joe Stalin, for all they know.”

“Oh, yeah, about the time school starts we’ll have to go back east to--” Herman tensed--“Pleasantville. It’s around New York, you know. Gramps has a job there, he’s the handyman at the Reader’s Digest place.”

Lon Ames glanced at the pair of us. “Out here, we’re not big on previous. Just so’s you can do the job.”

The ranch. “Maybe *is* Switzerland.”

Manitowoc could have been a million miles away. For that matter, so could Great Falls and Gram.

foreman rousts the bunkhouse: "It's time to get up and pay for your bed."

--Queen, a high-headed smart old mare, about could operate the stack man that way by herself, tugging sleepy Bingo along with her--

"How's the crew, Lonnie?"

"Pretty much the usual.

He spotted me. "Who do we have here?"

"We saw you at Crow Fair."

"Did you now." Rags showed a long-jawed grin.

Herman gave him a handshake that made him wince.

"Hey, be careful. That's the hand I dance with."

"King's Hex. You rode him."

"I'm a fortunate old kid."

To the hayfield. This unforgettable summer... We got down to it.

The hay crop was gorgeous. Lon Ames... "You know what's said about Montana. Any good year has to provide for all its poor relations." But you could tell he was pleased, and in the good weather and bountiful windrows the crew turned into haymaking fiends, the loaf-shaped haystacks rising in the fields...Some days we skidded the beaverslide to three new fields...

grindstone with pedal

Harvey at table: "That tastes like more."

It showed that bad, did it.

Montana weather is always in a hurry.

The rodeo star ranch owner.

“Come again?”

“I solid mean it.”

“What do you know for sure?”

“Precious little, and little that’s precious.”

It was the mean little sheriff from Glasgow.

“I thought you going to see relatives. Back east someplace.”

“Here’s--here’s my uncle right here.”

“Just where do you fit into this, Bosephus?”

“Herman. I am Scotty’s uncle.”

“You sure sound like it,” the sheriff said cynically.

“I don’t give a big rat’s ass about that.”

Rags: “What seems to be the diffewculty?”

other sheriff responds, tells Kinnick this is Rags Rasmussen.

“No crap?” The sheriff took in Rags. “Saw you ride at the Calgary Stampede. You do know how to stick on a horse.”

“It’s a living,” Rags replied, glancing at the badge on Kinnick’s narrow chest. He turned to the other lawman. “What is this, Al, a sheriffs’ convention? Should I be charging rent?”

“Sheriff Kinnick’s from up at Glasgow. He’s got a warrant for your stack man.”

Rags looked at 00. “How about if we give you three or four other guys from the crew for Harv, straight across. It’d be equal in the amount of work they each put out.”

The Glasgow sheriff forced a chuckle. "Let's get down to the pussy purr here."

"You got a sheet of paper to back that up?" Rags asked. The sheriff grumpily handed over the warrant and Rags read it all the way through, looking up when he got to the bottom. "What did I hear your name is?"

"They're brothers!" I blurted. "I heard them both say so."

"That right? Spit in your milk, did he?"

"That don't matter."

"And you don't have anything better to do than track me down across half the state."

"He broke out of jail."

"Told you he's a hard worker," Rags said mildly. "What were you in for?"

"Fightin' in a bar."

Harvey aside, every man there gave Sheriff Kinnick a sideways look. Rags rubbed his jaw and spoke the common thought. "Something like that means you could arrest everybody on the place, starting with me."

"That's as may be," the little sheriff muttered, glancing around at the ring of faces, "but none of you acted up like that in my jurisdiction. I'm only interested in this knothed. C'mon, Harv, let's go get you some free board and room in lovely Wolf Point."

Harvey folded his arms on his chest. "Nothin' doin'."

"God damn it," the sheriff exploded, "if you do the crime, you're supposed to do the time! That's practically in the Bible. Now get in the patrol car. Front seat. Leave room in the back for other customers," he checked on Herman and me.

"Still nothin' doin'," Harvey declared, not budging. "That jurisdiction you talk about--it maybe's slipped your mind I busted out of jail in Wolf Point, and that's not in your county, the way I see it."

The Glasgow sheriff scowled. "You're turning into a regular jailhouse lawyer, are you, all the experience you're getting behind bars." He poked his hat higher on his head to try to look taller as he faced Harvey. "I'm taking you in for violating my custody, not once but twice when I packed you over there to the Wolf Point calaboose. Like I'm gonna do again."

Listening hard, the sheriff from Dillon appeared uneasy but didn't say anything. Harvey did, though. "Carl, I'll go with you on one condition. I serve my sentence, how much was that again?"--

"Forty-five days," his step-brother lawman answered peevisly.

"Jeezus, for fightin' in a bar?" one of the hoboes on the crew said.

"Plus whatever the judge throws at you for jailbreaking," Sheriff Kinnick said, glaring around at the audience.

--"in your jail there in Glasgow. That way, Janie can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won't have to bust out." He gazed at the smaller man. "If you won't do that for me, you'll have to shoot me to take me."

The mention of a smoke wagon .

The Dillon sheriff had taken two steps back. "Unless he attacks you, I'm not in this."

"Sounds like a pretty fair deal to me," Rags chipped in, the crew backing him with murmurs of agreement.

Sheriff Kinnick had dropped a hand toward his gun butt, but not quite touching it. He cast another glance around at the bunch of us, his hand twitching, then he let it fall to his side. "Okay, loverboy, Glasgow and Janie it is." "That still leaves this pair."

"J. Edgar, you and me need to palaver," Rags drawled. He jerked his head toward the horse corral and ambled off to it. Sheriff Kinnick's face darkened, but he pivoted to follow Rags, warning over his shoulder, "Don't try to quit the

country while my back is turned, Harv.” With a straight face Harvey responded he wouldn’t think of escaping right out in the open. Actually, hightailing off into the sagebrush was on my mind. Where we stood watching, though, Herman’s hand had gripped my shoulder when he heard *palaver*. I wasn’t so sure any amount of talking to the mean little sheriff could help us, dead-set as he was to clap me in a foster home and haul Herman off to whatever they did to enemy aliens. Rags was speaking softly to the horses and feeding them sugar cubes by the time the sheriff joined him at the corral, and the soft drawl that the crowd of us could not quite hear clearly now was directed at the sheriff. After a little of that, the sheriff was the one rubbing his jaw. He edged closer to Rags and said something so low we couldn’t catch it. Rags drew his head back and looked down at him with not a favorable expression, but after a moment stuck his hand out. They shook, and headed over to us, the sheriff strutting beside Rags’ long-legged stride.

“Let’s get your stuff and hit the road, Harv.” He turned to Herman and me. “On second thought, these yahoos aren’t my worry.”

“I have to go up and enter the bronc ridin’ at the Glasgow rodeo.” “And beforehand, ride at the head of the parade through town right next with that peewee sheriff to help his election chances.”

“Now let’s sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I’ve let on the ranch. Come on up to the house.”

“Cook? You don’t say.” Mrs. 00 is only with us through haying.”

“No, honest, it’s--”

“As in, Howie you going to pull my leg next?”

The Tumbling T crew laughed their fool heads off, while ours shifted their feet uneasily. Until with a fortifying gulp of his beer, Skeeter took charge. “Tell ye what we’re gonna do, Deac, if you got any guts left in that stewpot belly of yours. We’ll bet that our fella here can have a swig of any of these”--the sweep of his arm indicated the line of beer spigots half the length of the bar, as any serious Montana bar had--“let’s say, oh, half a dozen just to make it sporting, and tell you like that”--a snap of his fingers like a starter’s gun going off--“what every by God one is, without him knowing aforehand.”

Deacon took a second look at Herman, who gave him back a vague horsy grin, and it all of a sudden occurred to me I had been gone long enough on the telephone call for him to have more than beer. That was Deacon’s conclusion, too, as he said shrewdly, “Beer gets to be plain old beer the more you drink of it. What do you think, boys? Shall we call this windjammer’s bluff?” That brought cries of “Hell, yeah! and “I’m in!” from the Tumbling T crew.

“This suit you okay?” Highpockets made sure with Herman.

“Ja,” said Herman, with a wink at me which I found alarmingly oo. “To a Tumbler T!”

“Ernie, set him up six of the Montana brews, shot glasses only,” Deacon directed. “We don’t want him swilling the stuff long enough to get familiar with it--the Muskeeter here claims he only needs a first swig anyway.” At the time I caught on to only half of the doubly smart maneuver he had just pulled--the restrictive shot glasses were what Herman was accustomed to in Saturday visits to the Schooner, but in that era when almost every Montana city had its own brewery, the brewers almost to a man were of German origin, leading to a certain sameness of product.

background

That's the story, almost. By that I mean there have been many other chapters of life since I experienced the dog bus and all it took me to, that unforgettable summer, but none that capture memory, page by page, so indelibly. Childhood is not wasted on the young. It is the start of the history that attaches to each of us, the first letters of the signature on existence that we become.

And more right than she even knew, Kate Schmidt ...when she called me a storer, for that is how I have made my living--my life really. With my mouth. Some are told quickly. When Gram was gone (died), Herman (and I) stayed on at the Big Hole ranch... I traveled to Montana State College in Bozeman--of course, by Greyhound--and there met (a prof), another grownup who took me in. OO was an auctioneer on weekends, and I picked up the chants from him. I was hired at the big livestock OO in Billings, and then at Denver. It was back in the Big Hole, though, that my real break came--as announcer at the Wisdom Roundup, the annual rodeo taking place within sight of the willows where Herman and I jungled up with the hoboes.

From there, it was straight up. Rodeo contractor in that crowd..."You've got a helluva voice, and you seem to know which end of a horse...

Despite
what I
said
old saying
youth

That time
1
OO
of life

Did they
ever
marry?